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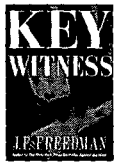

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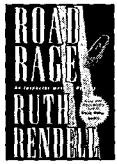

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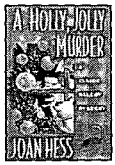

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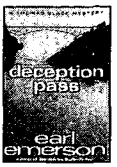

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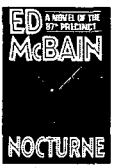

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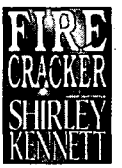

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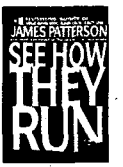

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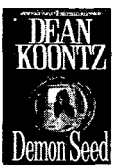

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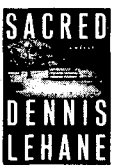

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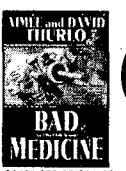

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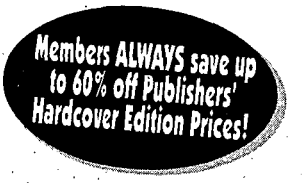

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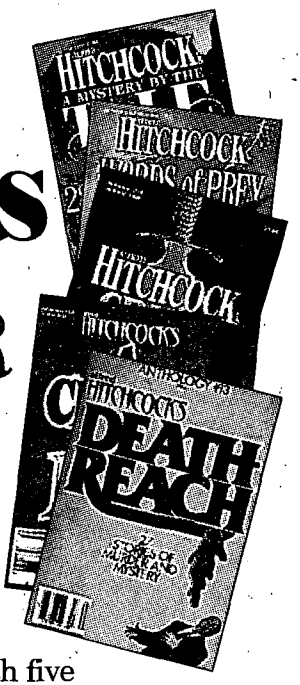

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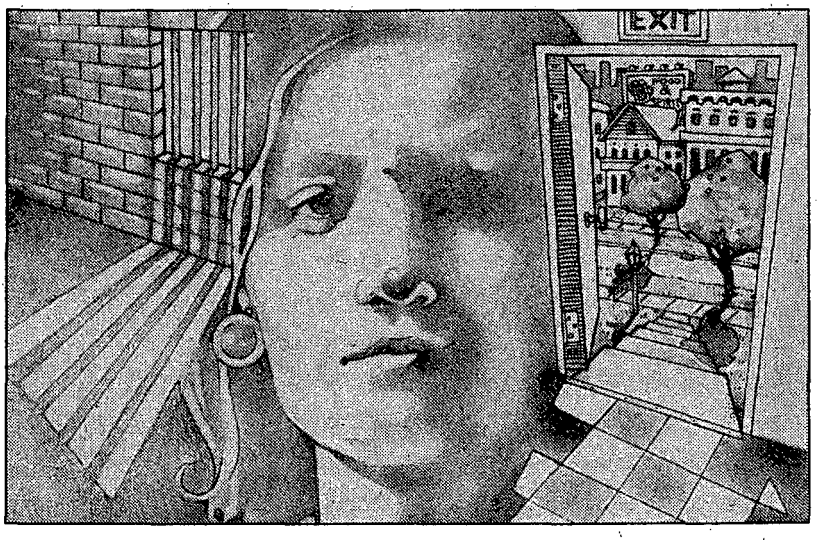

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THE HALFWAY WOMAN

by Clark Howard

The woman left her office at ten past five, as usual. She walked to the corner and waited at the bus stop with several other people. When the bus came a few minutes later, she got on.

Lee got on right behind her, carrying his zippered nylon athletic bag with UCLA lettered on its side.

Lee had been watching the woman for four weeks. Her routine Monday through Friday never varied. Monday nights she left work, rode the bus home, and stayed in her apartment for the evening. Tuesday nights she and another woman from her office had dinner together, went to a movie, then took separate buses home. Wednesday nights she stayed home again. Thursday nights she went to a branch library for an hour or two, then went home. Friday nights she stopped at a market to grocery shop, then went home.

Four weeks. Exactly the same routine. It never varied. She

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never went out with a man, never visited anyone's home, never had visitors to her apartment, and as far as Lee could tell, had no close personal attachments with anyone. At least, not during the week. Lee did not know what she did on weekends. He did not care. Lee never raped on weekends.

Lee liked to play a guessing game with himself about the women he stalked. This woman's name was Marilyn L. Arndt. He made a list of all the female names he could think of beginning with the letter L, then tried to guess what the middle name was. In this case he had guessed Lorraine; somehow it seemed to go with Marilyn. He also guessed her age: thirty-one. Height: five feet, four inches. Weight: one hundred thirty-one. And he liked to guess the color of the underwear they would be wearing on *his* night. As he sat near Marilyn Arndt on the bus, he guessed that she was wearing blue underwear.

In some categories of guessing, Lee was remarkably good. After he was through with the women, he checked the personal identification in their purses. Rarely was he off more than an inch in height or five pounds in weight. He did worse on ages, seldom coming within two years. On underwear color, he broke about even, although he protected his average by guessing white more than all other colors combined. But as far as the middle initial was concerned, that was a washout. Lee had raped nineteen women and never once correctly guessed the middle name of any of them.

Marilyn Arndt got off the bus at Malcolm Avenue in West Los Angeles. Lee got off at Glendon, the next corner. As he walked down the quiet residential street, he looked like a typical young California college student, carrying an ordinary UCLA athletic bag. Aside from a slight nervous tic in his left eyelid when he was sexually excited, there was nothing extraordinary about his appearance or manner. On the surface, he was the kind of

A four-time *EQMM* Readers Award winner, Clark Howard has been writing short fiction for magazines since the late 1950s. A favorite theme of the California-based author's is the prison system and the inmates who pass through it. In his latest story he focuses on the last link in the system, parole, and the people who come under it and supervise it.

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young man at whom little old ladies smiled.

As Lee walked down the first block of Glendon, he knew that Marilyn Arndt would be walking down the second block of Malcolm. It was Monday night, so she would be going directly home. At the first corner, Lee turned and walked over to Malcolm. He knew that by then Marilyn would have reached the end of the second block and be entering her building. By the time Lee got to Malcolm and turned into her block, Marilyn would have taken her mail from a row of boxes in the foyer and started upstairs. She lived in a twelve-unit building, three stories, no elevator. By the time Lee got to the front of her building, he imagined that she would already be in her apartment, probably undressing. . . .

When he reached her building, Lee did not enter the front door; instead, he continued around the corner to the alley. On the way, he unzipped the bag he was carrying, removed a tool belt and slung it over his shoulder, and took out a clipboard of papers and stuck it under his arm. He pinned a close replica of a telephone company ID badge to his shirt, folded the now-empty nylon bag into eighths and stuffed it into his back pocket, and buckled the tool belt around his waist. He took a pair of work gloves from his belt and put them on.

Now looking like a young utility company worker instead of a student, Lee walked along the alley to Marilyn Arndt's building and went down four cement steps to the basement. With a six-inch metal ruler from his tool belt, he slipped the lock of the basement door and entered. There was still enough daylight coming through the half-window at ground level for him to see an oil furnace, storage lockers, several bicycles, some extra window screens, the main fuse box, and near that, what he was looking for, the building's telephone line box.

Stepping over and opening the lid of the line box, he examined the twelve individual pairs of wires that converged in the box and formed a small cable. He had already memorized Marilyn Arndt's telephone number; now he isolated the pair of wires for that number, and with cutters from his tool belt snipped the pair cleanly and closed the box.

Lee climbed the inside stairs to the foyer level, opened the door a crack to check that the foyer was clear, then proceeded up the front stairs to the third floor. Ringing Marilyn Arndt's apartment bell, he pretended to be writing on the clipboard while he waited. Presently, he sensed that she was looking at him through the peephole.

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"Yes, what is it?" she asked from inside.

"Telephone company, ma'am," he said. "Here to fix your phone."

"There's nothing wrong with my phone."

"If you'll check, ma'am, you'll find that there's no dial tone. We had a major cable outage today and lost about half the subscribers in this exchange. I've got yours as one that's out of service. But if you say it's okay—"

"Well, wait a minute, let me see."

Lee waited. She was back in less than a minute, removing the safety chain, opening the door.

"I didn't even know it wasn't working," she said. "I just got home—"

Lee smiled. "That's the way with a lot of people." He stepped inside. "Where's it at?"

"Over there, in the bedroom—"

How convenient, Lee thought. Maybe this would be his night. L for Lorraine, blue underwear, and everything. On his way to the bedroom, he heard her close the apartment door, but she did not hook the safety chain back in place; he usually had to do that himself, later.

Marilyn Arndt followed him into the bedroom. Lee knelt next to her nightstand and removed the bottom plate of the telephone. Sticking a screwdriver into the open bottom of the set, he simulated a quick repair job. "There, you go. Good as new."

"That looked easy," she said cheerfully.

"Everything's easy if you know how to do it," Lee said. He stepped out of her way. "Would you verify that it's working okay, please. Just dial the time-and-temperature number."

"Sure."

She moved past him and reached for the receiver.

Before she got to it, one of his gloved hands covered her mouth from behind.

At nine o'clock the following morning, Jane Wright walked into the reception area of the state Civil Service Commission offices in downtown Los Angeles and handed her appointment card to a young black woman at the front desk. "Have a seat right over there, please," the woman said routinely. "Your name will be called when the board is ready to interview you."

"Thanks." Jane walked over to a waiting area where half a dozen others already sat. All men. As she selected a chair, she

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knew without glancing over that they were all looking at her. And not with any physical or carnal interest, as men often looked at women, but probably, she imagined, with curiosity more than anything else. Wondering. Why would a woman want a job like this?

Sitting down, Jane crossed her legs, smoothed her skirt over her knees, and ignored the stares. She was thirtyish, not particularly attractive, certainly not pretty in the girl-next-door sense of the word, and usually more serious than smiling; one's first impression of her being that she was probably competent: that she had a mind of her own, a good one, and was neither pleased nor displeased with the rest of herself. Sensible was a good word for her, overall.

A clerk came out to the waiting area and said, "Mr. Barlow? Room three, please." One of the men rose and went down the hall.

Jane wished that things had gone better with her mother about the new job. Helen Wright had been against her daughter applying for the job from the very beginning. "A *parole officer!* Why on earth would you want to be a parole officer?" she had asked the first time Jane mentioned it.

"I'm not sure," Jane had admitted candidly. "Except that I have a degree in communications studies. Maybe I want to start communicating."

"You have a perfectly good job in public relations," Helen said.

"Public relations, Mother, is manipulation, not communication," Jane said drily.

Helen had adjusted a pillow in her wheelchair and fallen silent. She had been in the wheelchair for twenty-five years, since Jane was a child. An innocent victim in a supermarket holdup, she had been shot accidentally by one of the escaping stickup men. Her husband had left her a year later; Helen had raised Jane alone, doing home secretarial work, stuffing envelopes, conducting telephone surveys, sometimes working fourteen hours a day to pay the bills. She was a woman who believed in finding a niche in life and staying in it. Jane had worked her way through college, was on a sound career path at Durham & Durham Public Relations, and her mother could think of no sensible reason for Jane to even consider looking for a new job.

"Jane, dear," she tried to persuade her, "as a parole officer, have you thought of the low types of women you'd be dealing with?"

"Not women, Mother," Jane had answered. "Men. This job is a parole officer for men."

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Helen Wright's expression had darkened. "You mean the kind of person who put me in this chair?"

"Yes, I guess so. Maybe if that person had been given the right kind of guidance—if someone had *communicated* with him—you wouldn't be in that chair."

Helen had shaken her head adamantly. "I don't like this, Jane. I don't like it at all."

"I'm sorry you don't, Mother," Jane had replied.

Jane had gone to sleep that night thinking that perhaps it was time to get her own apartment.

"Mr. Meadows?" the clerk called. "Room three, please." Another man left the waiting area to be interviewed.

Jack Durham, Jane's boss at the public relations firm, also thought she was making a mistake. He was an energetic dynamo of a man with a wall of framed awards. "You'd be a lot better off staying here, Jane," he had told her. "There's a lot of room in this business for a smart woman like you."

"I realize that," she had admitted. "But I'm convinced that public relations just isn't where it's at for me. The business is too—I don't know—too *superficial.* I want to do something, well—more honest, I guess."

Jack Durham had shaken his head. "An idealist is born," he said wryly. Jane wasn't sure why, but his words had both angered and embarrassed her.

"Miss Wright? Room three, please," the clerk called at last.

Several hundred miles north, in a hallway of an administration building within the walls of Folsom State Prison, another person was also waiting to be interviewed. His name was Tony Chavez, a tall, lean Hispanic-American in his late thirties, not handsome but squeaky-clean looking, dressed in prison blues. He was sitting on a bench with several other convicts, outside a door with a sign that read: STATE PAROLE BOARD.

Tony's shirt-sleeves were turned up twice at the cuff, revealing on his left forearm a tattoo of the eagle, globe, and anchor insignia of the United States Marine Corps. As he waited, Tony nervously drummed his fingertips silently on his knees. A Hispanic con next to him noticed the tattoo. "Hey, *carnal,*" he used the Latino term for brother, "better roll your sleeves down; the board don't like tats."

"It's not a street tat, *carnal;* it's from the Marines," Tony said.

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The other con shrugged. "A gang's a gang, man. They don't like tats."

Tony rolled his sleeves down and buttoned his cuffs. Crossing his arms, he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. I should have stayed in the Marines, he thought. I'd have nearly eighteen years in, probably be a noncommissioned officer by now, be close to a twenty-year pension. Yeah, I should have stayed in—

But he knew he could not have. After Vietnam, he had to get as far away from military service as he could get. The things he had seen over there, the things he had *done,* still haunted him.

Tony had returned to the East Los Angeles *barrio* with his right arm in a sling from shrapnel he had taken just under the extremity of his collarbone. For six months he went daily to a physical therapy center to regain strength and flexibility in his shoulder. When he thought he was fully mended, he looked up Mingo, a black boxing trainer who ran a local gym. Tony had fought for Mingo before being drafted for the Vietnam War. He had gone undefeated in seven four-rounders and Mingo thought Tony had a lot of potential.

Mingo had been glad to see Tony. "Sure, we get you back in shape, see what you can do," the trainer agreed enthusiastically.

A month later, Tony went in for a four-round preliminary against a tough young kid up from Tijuana who gave him a thorough ass-kicking. Tony hadn't been knocked out, but he might as well have been. After the fight, Mingo had shaken his head sadly. "Must be that war wound, kid. You ain't got a right-hand punch no more. Better find some other way to make a living."

That had been the end of Tony's boxing career.

"Chavez, number H-1172!" a corrections officer called from the parole office door. Tony snapped out of his reverie and hurried over to the door.

In Los Angeles at the Civil Service Commission, Jane Wright sat before a panel of three men. Smiling, pleasant, they were also mildly condescending as they interviewed her.

"We see that your degree is in communications studies, Ms. Wright. Normally, applicants for this position have majored in sociology. How do you think your education would help you in this type of career?"

"Well, it seems to me," Jane replied, "that the ability to commu-

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nicate successfully with parolees would be a major asset. Any guidance that a parole officer gives them *has* to begin with communication. I can communicate. And my background in public relations has shown me that I have very good creative problem-solving abilities. I believe that combination would serve me very well in the position."

"You impress me as a nice, genteel young woman, Ms. Wright. Do you really feel that parole work is the right occupation for you?"

"Well, I'm not at all sure that I'm genteel, by any means," Jane said, "but even if I were, I believe that nice, genteel young women can do meaningful work. They can contribute to a better society. The desire to do something that one feels is worthwhile is very important to a person's performance. I have that desire."

"How do you think you'd feel, having to deal directly with rapists, child molesters, and other unsavory persons?"

"I don't think it would bother me, particularly if I felt I could help them. At least I'd *know* what kind of people they were. Sometimes we have everyday dealings with unsavory people and we don't even know it. I think it would be comfortable to know."

"When one of your parolees failed to report, how would you feel about going into some tough neighborhood to look for him?"

"I'm sure I'd be uneasy. But sometimes I'm uneasy walking to my car at night after a movie. None of our streets are completely safe anymore. That's one of the reasons I want to help do something about it."

No matter what they asked her, Jane had a direct, forthright reply—and her answers made sense. The men on the panel seemed reluctant to accept her, but were having a great deal of difficulty *not* doing so. Her calm manner, positive attitude, and sincere desire for the job came through in everything she said, and the panel could not help being impressed. But were they impressed enough to set a precedent? Jane wondered. The state had never had a female parole officer supervising male parolees. They would have to appoint one someday, she knew—it was inevitable—but she was not at all certain that she would be the first.

"You'll hear from the Civil Service Commission by mail, Ms. Wright," she was told at the end of the interview. "Thank you for applying."

❖ ❖ ❖

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At Folsom Prison, Tony Chavez sat on a straight chair before a table at which there were three members of the parole board, who comprised the hearing panel. They were all studying copies of Tony's police record, trial transcript, and prison record. Presently, one of them looked up.

"I take it this was your first offense, Chavez," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Suppose you tell us your version of how you got into trouble."

All three looked at him then. Tony cleared his throat and told them the story.

"See, I had been back from Vietnam for more than three years. I hadn't been able to make it as a professional fighter because of a war wound. And when I started looking for something else, jobs were pretty scarce—"

He told them about the night he had been sitting with two other Hispanics and an Anglo in the back booth of a bar, drinking beer and passing a joint around.

"Look, *carnal,*" one of the other Hispanics had said, "don't be a chump. You're broke, you can't fight no more, you can't find no work. What you gonna do, keep collecting welfare and be a loser all your life? Where's your pride, man? You don't have to take charity!" He had leaned forward and gripped Tony's arm. "This job we got planned is a pushover, *carnal.* We just need one more guy for a lookout—"

Three nights later, they had tried to hold up a large chain liquor store. Tony was standing watch at the front entrance while the other three looted the checkout registers and customers. But one of the store clerks had pushed a silent alarm button under the counter with his knee. While the robbery was still in progress, police cars suddenly converged on the scene from all directions. One of the Hispanics was shot and killed trying to escape out the alley door. Tony and the other two surrendered.

"So you pleaded guilty at your trial?" one of the parole board members asked.

"Yes, sir." Tony shrugged. "I *was* guilty."

"Your mistake has cost you nine years of your life," another said. "Has it taught you a lesson?"

"One I'll never forget," Tony replied sincerely.

There were some other questions and then the man in the middle chair said, "All right, Chavez, you'll be advised of our decision. That's all."

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Jane Wright and Tony Chavez passed the days waiting: Jane at her desk in the public relations firm, Tony working in the prison laundry at Folsom. Both went about their respective duties mechanically, almost lethargically, both feeling in a kind of limbo, like a person waiting for major surgery.

Jane desperately wanted the parole officer job; she had convinced herself that it was essential to bring some meaning into her life.

And Tony, just as desperately, wanted *out;* he wanted to begin making some kind of decent life for himself—before it was too late.

For each of them, very different people that they were, it was an uneasy time, a time where something was about to happen to them that, one way or another, would *matter*—for the rest of their lives.

They waited, and the waiting became tense, their preoccupation with it became consuming and naggingly distracting. They were both on edge a good deal of the time.

But finally it was over.

Jane Wright parked her car in the driveway one evening and walked out to the curbside mailbox. There was an official-looking letter. Taking a deep breath, she opened it. As she read it, her eyes brightened and a new kind of excitement overcame her. The parole officer job was hers.

That same evening, Tony Chavez returned to his cell in prison and found an envelope on the bars. Ripping it open, he read its content with hungry eyes. After reading it a second time, and a third, he leaned back against the bars and felt the tension of waiting draining away, a great relief flooding him. Parole had been granted.

On that same night, in the Wilshire district of Los Angeles, Lee was holding his clipboard, knocking on the door of another apartment.

One month later, Jane Wright and Tony Chavez met.

Tony was in the parole commission offices waiting room, reporting for the first time. It had taken him four weeks to be processed out of the prison system and into the parole system. He had arrived in the city by bus the previous day and spent the night at Duffy House, a post-release center that provided parolees living

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quarters for up to ninety days. As Tony waited to meet his parole officer, he was more nervous than he had been in Vietnam combat or in his first pro fight.

But Tony Chavez was no more nervous than Jane Wright. It was Jane's first day on the job after a four-week training program. When she entered the waiting room to summon the first parolee she would interview, she felt as if she was about to take what might be a positive pregnancy test.

"Mr. Chavez," she called out. "Tony Chavez—" Tony came up to her, a slip of paper in his hand. "Come with me, please," she said. She led Tony into her small, new, still neat and uncluttered office. When they got inside, she held out her hand and said, "Mr. Chavez, I'm Miss Wright, your parole officer."

Tony stared incredulously, first at her outstretched hand, then at her face, then at the slip of paper he held. "You're J. Wright?"

"Yes. J for Jane." When it became obvious that he was too surprised to shake hands, she said, "Please have a seat," and went around the desk to her own chair. Tony remained standing, mouth agape.

"I never heard of a guy having a halfway woman before," he said in disbelief.

Jane frowned. "Halfway woman? What's that?"

"That's you," he said, thinking, Man, she doesn't even know what she is. "See," he explained, "when a guy gets out of the joint on parole, he's like halfway out, you know? Halfway free. Like he's not free all the way, he's still controlled by a parole officer. Lots of dudes, they call their parole officer a halfway man." He again looked closely at the slip of paper he held, comparing it to the nameplate on her desk. Both read: J. Wright. "I just never heard of a guy having a halfway woman before," he said again.

"Nobody has. You're the first. Please sit down."

Tony sat on the extreme edge of the chair.

"Now then," Jane said, all business, "you're staying at the Duffy House, so you've got a place to live for a while. It appears that the first thing we have to do is get you a job. Do you have any prospects yourself?"

"No. Look, are you sure there's not another J. Wright around here somewheres?"

Jane locked eyes with him. "Mr. Chavez, *I* am your parole officer. What you see is what you've got. Now let's get past this, shall

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we?" She turned a page in his file. "Prison laundry. Any other work experience?"

"Uh, no. I did a little boxing before I went into the Marines and tried to pick it up when I got back, but it didn't work out. That was when I, uh—I got in trouble."

Jane opened her copy of the Job Prospect Log, which listed businesses and organizations willing to hire ex-convicts, and the openings available. "Your file states that you grew up in East Los Angeles. There's a very interesting job available with ELACON—have you ever heard of that organization?"

"Uh, no."

"Well, ELACON is an acronym—that is, it stands for East Los Angeles Council. It's a nonprofit group whose purpose is to help the residents of East L. A. to help themselves. I was briefed on ELACON in a job-training class I just finished; the group works very closely with the parole department. It has no specific goals, no particular areas of concentration; it simply helps in any situation where help is needed. If someone is hooked on drugs and wants to quit, they find that person a program. If a girl is pregnant but not married, they try to help her decide what's best for her to do. If someone is being harassed by the police, or threatened by a street gang, or doesn't know how to fill out their income-tax form, or wants to go to college but doesn't know how to apply for financial aid, or someone needs training to get a driver's license, or thinks he's been cheated by a used-car dealer or a TV repairman—well, you get the general idea."

"Yeah, it's like a mother, priest, and best friend," Tony said.

"Exactly," Jane exclaimed, pleased by Tony's analogy. "The group tries to help solve problems for all the residents of East L. A.—white, black, Hispanic, whatever. Tries to keep them from fighting among themselves—tries to settle problems without having to call in the authorities. Anyway, they need a field man; someone to perform a wide variety of duties."

"What makes you think I could do a job like that?" Tony asked, almost guardedly.

"According to your file, you seem to fit the requirements. They want someone who knows East L.A. Someone who's street smart and can handle himself. Someone without a lot of family ties who can devote long hours to the job—"

"What's the pay?" Tony asked.

"It's negotiable. Are you willing to talk to them?"

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"Okay, sure." Tony shrugged. He studied Jane. "How'd you get to be a parole officer, anyway?"

"I passed a test."

"No, what I mean is, why'd you *want* to be a parole officer?"

"What I put on my application was that I wanted to make a meaningful contribution to society. Look, we're here to talk about you, not me. Why don't you have a seat out in the waiting room and I'll try to get you an appointment to see someone at ELACON."

"Okay."

"Before you go," Jane said, opening another file, "do you know a man named Harry Keller? He was released from Folsom the same time you were."

"Yeah, we rode down to L.A. on the same bus and checked into Duffy House together."

"Duffy House called and said he wasn't there at bed check this morning. He's due in here for his first report appointment, just like you. Any idea where he could be?"

Tony shook his head. "I know that he was real worried that he hadn't heard from his wife in a long time. Maybe he's out trying to find her."

"I hope he realizes," Jane said, "that if he doesn't report in here before the end of the day, he'll be in violation of his parole. That makes him subject to immediate return to prison."

"Listen," Tony said impulsively, "why don't you give me some of the addresses in his file and I'll see if I can find the guy. I got nothing better to do until you can get me that appointment. I mean, I'd hate to see this dude get violated over something like this. Maybe I can help him, you know?"

Jane stared at him for a moment, then quickly got over her surprise and agreed. Things, she thought, might be looking up.

After Tony Chavez left, before Jane had a chance to call ELACON, the assistant supervisor in charge of her section, Will Masters, strolled into her office. "How's the first day going?" he asked.

"One no-show and one interview that went very well."

"Violate the no-show if he's not here by the end of the day," Masters instructed. His tone was brisk, the words almost an order.

"Right," Jane said, looking up at a clock on her wall. It was barely ten A.M.

"You don't want to give these guys any slack," Masters said. "I

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was a cop for nine years before I moved over here. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"Yes, I'm sure you do," Jane replied quietly.

Masters sat down without being invited. He smiled, but without any real warmth. "I looked over your personnel file when you were assigned to me. You're single."

"Yes, single."

"Yeah, me too. Divorced, really. Twice, as a matter of fact."

Jane half smiled and did not comment. Will Masters was a big, somewhat blustery man, thickening around the middle. The features of his face were too small for the size of his head; it gave him an almost adolescent look.

"Since we're both unattached, how about dinner tonight?" he asked. "I know a Chinese place that has two dinners for the price of one on Monday nights."

"Look, I'll be honest with you," Jane said with directness. "I kind of like to get to know a person awhile before I date. And I'm a little skittish about going out with someone I work for."

Masters leaned forward a little. "Could be to your advantage," he said in a quieter voice. "I'm the one who assigns the cases, you know. Some cases are easy, some are hard." He winked, a little ridiculously, Jane thought.

"Why don't you just give me all the difficult ones," Jane suggested. "That way I'll learn faster."

A petulant look came over his face and Will Masters said, with brittle words, "Sure, okay, if that's the way you want to start out here." He rose, tossed, "Be right back" over his shoulder, and left the office.

Jane rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. *What,* she silently and uneasily asked herself, *have you done now, dunce?* Sighing restively, she was again about to pick up the phone to call ELACON when Masters stalked back in and dropped, almost tossed, half a dozen dog-eared folders on her desk and said, "These are a few of our problem cases. They're all due in for reports today. I think they could use a fresh perspective—and you've got the freshest one I've seen in a long time. Have a nice day."

"Thank you, sir," Jane said sweetly to his retreating back.

The first of her "problem cases" was Roscoe Drake, an angry, unsmiling black man, former member of the Dark Warriors, an elite black street gang that preyed on random white victims.

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Roscoe had served his time for the Dark Warrior crimes; now he was out, said he was trying to live straight, but his reputation kept getting in the way.

"I've found a girl that I'd like to marry," he told Jane bitterly, stalking up and down in her office, refusing to sit. "But her family's against me, dig? I want to settle down, live like everybody else, but they don't believe me. *Nobody* believes me. See, too many people *remember* me; they remember how I used to be. Those young brothers down in the 'hood think I'm some kind of *hero*. I can't get away from my image."

"Then change the image," Jane suggested. She was speed-reading his file summary as they talked.

"I've tried!" Roscoe snapped.

"Try harder."

"Oh, sure! How?"

Jane closed the file, rose from behind her desk, and began stalking right alongside him. "Remember those white people the Dark Warriors terrorized? You used to wreck small stores, set houses on fire, beat up people on the street. Pick out one of those victims from the past. Go to that person and say you want to make up for what you did, pay that victim back in some way—"

"Are you crazy, woman? I *already* paid for what I did—in the joint!"

"You paid society for breaking the law; now pay back a victim—and do it voluntarily. If your girl's family, and the young blacks who admire you so much, all see you *personally* making retribution, they're going to look at you in a whole different light. You want a new image? Go out and *make* one."

Roscoe shook his head. "That is the dumbest, stupidest idea I ever heard! Do you think any of those honkeys would even let me get *near* them? They'd call the pigs on me in nothing flat! I'd be violated for harassment and back in San Quentin before the week was out!" He sneered coldly at Jane. "No, thanks, Miss Halfway Woman. I'll find some other way to solve my problem."

Roscoe stalked out of the office. Jane sighed quietly. "Thanks for stopping by," she said caustically to herself.

Her next problem was Billy, a sensitive young gay who was in the throes of depression. He was pitiful.

"I'm not going to be able to make it on the outside," he whined. "I'm too alone, too lonely. In prison I had Fred, my old man. He

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looked after me, you know. I could count on him. Out here I can't seem to find any friends. Nobody likes me. Everybody thinks I'm weird."

After listening to him complain disagreeably for twenty minutes, Jane finally had to put him on hold in order to take her next case.

"Let me think about some way to help you," she said. "Go out in the waiting room. Read a magazine for an hour or so. I'll work something out for you, I promise."

A burglar named Smitty came in after Billy left. He was older than Jane's mother.

"I got fired. Drinking on the job." He shrugged helplessly. "Look, if I don't have a few drinks during the day, I get very nervous. It's not that I'm an alcoholic or anything like that. I just work better with a couple of shots under my belt. When I was out before, I always had a couple of drinks before I'd do a burglary. Kept me nice and steady for getting in and out of the places I robbed. But these jobs I've worked on since I've been out—in warehouses, stockrooms, grocery stores—the bosses there don't understand. They think I'm a lush."

"No joke," said Jane. "Didn't you get off booze the three years you were in Soledad?"

"Are you kidding? I got better booze in the joint than I can afford on the street. They made it in the kitchen, let it ferment in the furniture factory, and sold it in Jergens lotion bottles in the chapel. I had a regular supply. I was steady the whole three years. If I hadn't been, I'd never have gotten by the parole board."

Jane shook her head. "Incredible. Have you tried Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"Sure. Tried all of them cures. They work fine. Get me off the sauce completely. Make me real nervous, shaky. Then nobody'll hire me at all. So I take a couple of drinks, steady down, and I get a job. Then they catch me drinking to *stay* steady and they fire me. It's a vicious circle. I'm going back to burglary."

"No, you are *not* going back to burglary," Jane said emphatically. "You come back at two-thirty this afternoon. I'll think of some other way."

Now, she thought as he left, she had one parolee, Billy, sitting out in the waiting room; another, Smitty, coming back that afternoon; still another, Roscoe, who had stalked off to do Lord knew what; and a fourth, Tony Chavez, out looking for one, Harry

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Keller, who had not even shown up. Was she helping to improve society or what?

Dozier, a long-haired, leather-clad, tattooed, motorcycle type, came in next. He was livid because he could not find anyplace that would hire him. Everyplace the parole office sent him, he was told there were no openings.

"I done my time, I got a right to a job!" he proclaimed. "But everywhere I go for a job, they look at me like I'm some kind of freak. Like maybe I ought to change my looks. Well, I got a right to wear my hair long, and I got a right to wear leather instead of denim or corduroy or that wussy tweed—"

"You sure it's the hair and the leather?" asked Jane.

"What else could it be?" Dozier demanded.

"What about those?" She pointed to the tattoos on the backs of his hands. They were swastikas.

"Hey, those are the symbol of the White Brotherhood," Dozier said defensively. "That's a club I was in up at San Quentin."

"They used to be the symbol of something else," Jane said quietly, "something that most civilized people found repulsive and sick. If you're trying to get hired by people who are older than you, people who remember what that symbol represented, forget it. You're carrying around a built-in reason for people not to hire you—and it's tattooed right out there in the open where everybody can see it."

Dozier stared at his hands. "What can I do?" he asked, his indignation fading. "They won't wash off, you know."

"You could look for a job where you have to wear gloves," suggested Jane. "Or, if you're really serious, you could have a little laser surgery done to get rid of them permanently."

"Laser surgery?"

"Yes. I read an article about it recently. They use a laser beam to erase the ink color embedded in your skin."

"Does it hurt?" Dozier asked, lowering his voice. "I can't stand much pain."

Rolling her eyes, Jane tossed a Yellow Pages directory at him. "Here, look under 'Plastic Surgeons.' Let's find out what it costs."

A little while later, all parole officers were called into a special meeting to be briefed by a vice-squad commander, Captain Hillis. The subject of the briefing was a psychopathic rapist who had

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attacked a young librarian in her apartment, sodomized and beaten her badly, and escaped.

"The victim is in low-grade shock," the captain said. "She can't seem to remember anything about her attacker except that he told her to call him 'Lee' and that he had a slight nervous tic in his left eye. We don't know, of course, that the rapist is an ex-convict or parolee, but we're trying to cover every possibility; we think this perpetrator might be responsible for as many as a dozen other reported rapes, and possibly numerous unreported ones. So what we'd like you parole officers to do is give it some thought, check your files, take a close look at your current parolees, and see if you can come up with anyone named Lee, or anyone who has a tic or twitch of some kind in his left eye. If you suspect anyone, let us know and we'll put him under surveillance. We won't do anything but watch him, unless he gives us reason to bring him in. We appreciate your cooperation."

After the briefing, Will Masters walked back down the hall with Jane.

"How you doing with those problem cases?" he asked smugly.

"I'm not sure yet," Jane replied, refusing to be baited.

"Had any second thoughts about that dinner invitation?"

She smiled. "Afraid not. Haven't had a minute to think about anything except those problem cases."

She turned into her office and closed the door. Inside, she got out a department source book and started looking through it for some way to help Billy, who was still sitting out in the waiting room.

Tony Chavez was on the street in East Los Angeles looking for Harry Keller. He had checked with a couple of people Keller had listed as friends, but none of them had seen Harry. Then, finally, he found a former neighbor who had run into Harry in the neighborhood that morning.

"Yeah, I seen him a couple hours ago. He was trying to find out where his ex-wife was living."

"Ex-wife?" Tony recalled on the bus down from Folsom that Keller had only referred to her as his wife. He had not mentioned being divorced.

"Oh, sure. Marie divorced Harry while he was in prison. She's married to some other guy now. But she told my old lady that Harry wouldn't accept the fact that she wasn't his wife anymore. Kept writing her letters like everything was the same as it had

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been. My old lady said last week that Marie got real nervous when she heard that Harry was getting out. She was going over to that ELACON place to see if they could give her any advice."

Tony nodded. ELACON, that was the name of the place Jane Wright was going to send him to for a job. "Listen," he asked the former neighbor, "did you tell Harry that his ex-wife had gone to ELACON?"

The man shrugged. "Yeah. I didn't see nothing wrong with telling him. I mean, the guy seemed nice and calm, you know. Not pissed off or anything."

Tony thanked him and then walked briskly over to ELACON, which was only a few blocks away. When he told the young woman at the reception desk what he wanted, she took him to the office of Mr. Fuentes, an older, friendly man, Hispanic like Tony, who was the director of ELACON.

"Miss Wright of the parole department just called me a few minutes ago about you taking a job here," he said. "I didn't realize she was sending you right out."

"Uh, no, sir, she didn't," Tony said, and explained to Fuentes about Harry Keller and his ex-wife Marie. "I'm trying to run this guy down before he blows his parole."

Fuentes excused himself and went into another office. Presently he returned with a slip of paper in his hand. "Yes, Keller's former wife has been in to see us," he told Tony. "Her name is Marie Grey now. There was really not much we could do except advise her to let us know if Keller harassed her in any way. Apparently she hasn't had a problem because her husband was just here an hour ago and said they had not been bothered. He had stopped in to give us a new address."

"Her husband?" Tony frowned. "Who did he speak to when he came in?"

"Angela, one of our clerks."

"Is it okay if I talk to her for a minute?"

"Of course."

Fuentes summoned the young woman to his office.

"The man who came in and said he was Marie Grey's husband, what did he look like?" Tony asked her.

"He was Anglo. Had reddish hair. Freckles."

"That's Keller," Tony told Fuentes. He turned back to Angela. "When he gave you that new address, what did you do?"

"I just got out her case card and wrote it down."

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"Did that card have her other address on it?"

"Sure."

"Did he get a look at that card? See that other address?"

"I—I don't know—maybe—"

Mr. Fuentes said, "Angela, bring me that card." As she left the office, he turned to get his coat and car keys. "I'll drive you there," he told Tony.

Jane made some telephone calls and summoned Billy back into her office. She handed him a list.

"These are organized gay social clubs. They are all legitimate, all licensed. Memberships are very reasonable. I think you should pick one and join it."

Billy was surprised. "The other parole officers have always tried to get me to associate with straight people. They said it would be easier for me to assimilate back into society if I didn't tell people I was gay. How come you're not doing that?"

"Why should I?" Jane asked. "I wouldn't like it if you tried to make *me* give up men; why should I try to make *you* give them up? The way I see it, Billy, you've got to do what you're comfortable with. Maybe if in one of these clubs you can find a friend to take the place of the one you had in prison, life on the outside will become easier for you. Let's try it and see, okay?"

Billy agreed to try. As he was leaving, Betty, a young black woman who was the office receptionist, came in and invited Jane to lunch. "Yes, yes, yes," Jane said eagerly. "Anything to get out of here for a few minutes."

"You like the job that much, huh?" cracked Betty.

They went outside and walked toward a little coffee shop on the edge of the civic center.

"Masters hit on you yet?" Betty asked.

"Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, he did," Jane replied candidly.

"He must really be attracted to you," Betty said wryly. "Some girls he waits until the afternoon of their first day."

Jane laughed. Then, as they were crossing the street, she happened to glance up and saw a sign in the second-floor window of a commercial building. It read: Metropolitan School of Bartending.

"Listen, Betty," Jane said impulsively, "let me have a rain check on lunch, okay? I just got a brilliant idea and there's something I have to do."

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At two-thirty, when Smitty, the ex-burglar with the drinking habit, returned to her office, Jane was waiting for him with an almost haughty expression on her face. She handed him a slip of paper with an address written on it.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The Metropolitan School of Bartending," she told him.

"For what?"

"For you. You are going to become a bartender. I've made arrangements for you to attend on a delayed-payment plan. They'll get you a job when you graduate." Jane saw that Smitty was staring incredulously at her. She shrugged. "Think about it for a minute; it's the perfect job for you. Customers usually buy bartenders a few drinks during their shift; occasional drinking with the customer is part of *being* a bartender. It'll keep you steady—and it won't get you fired." She tilted her head inquisitively. "Beats burglary, doesn't it?"

When Smitty left her office, Jane raised both fists over her head and said, "Yes!"

Jane's last problem case of the day was a young man named Arnie Freeman who was on parole from a conviction of multiple counts of theft. He was an extremely timid, retiring young man who, Jane learned from his file, had committed dozens of minor thefts from stores throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

"I never expected to have a lady parole officer," he said shyly. "It seems kind of funny to talk to a lady about my problems."

"What problems are those, Arnie?" Jane asked carefully, conversationally.

"You know, problems with women," Arnie said. "They make fun of me because I'm shy. They tease me a lot. It makes me mad. When that used to happen, I'd go out and start stealing all over the place."

"I see by your file that you talked to the prison psychiatrist about that. What did he tell you to do when you became angry?"

"He told me to walk away from my anger, and from the person or people causing it. Just get up and walk away."

"And do you?"

"Sometimes. When I can. But, like, at work, I can't just get up and walk off the job."

Jane saw in the file that Arnie worked the midnight-to-eight shift in the Los Angeles *Herald* circulation department, checking

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out bound bundles of the morning edition to route supervisors who were in charge of groups of carriers.

"There's lots of girls who work the circulation desks at night," Arnie explained. "They process subscriber delivery orders and changes of address and that kind of thing, stuff that came in during the day, and assign them to districts and routes. I have to work right there with them."

Jane discreetly got into specifics with Arnie and was able to learn some of the things his female coworkers did—both intentionally and unwittingly—to taunt him. She realized that he was an extremely troubled young man.

"Arnie, let me schedule you to see a parole-department psychiatrist," Jane suggested.

Arnie shook his head. "No, I don't want to do that. All those shrinks do is mix me up more than I already am. I think I'll be able to handle it okay. I haven't started stealing again, so I know I must be okay so far."

Yeah, Jane thought, *so far.*

After Arnie left, Jane went in to see Will Masters. "I think Arnie Freeman may be a problem," she said, holding the file out to him. He did not bother to take it.

"They're *all* problems," he said. "What did you expect? We're not dealing with kindergartners here."

"No, I mean, he may be *more* of a problem, a serious problem. I think he may be getting ready to start committing thefts again to compensate for some current problems he may be having. Is there any way to require him to see a department psychiatrist if he doesn't want to?"

"Nope. He has a constitutional right to refuse psychiatric treatment. You can threaten to vacate his parole to encourage him to cooperate, but most of these parolees know that's just a bluff—unless you have a legitimate reason to do it." Masters sat back in his chair and linked his fingers on his stomach. "Even though you got off on the wrong foot with me, I'm going to give you some good advice. Best thing to do with a problem like Arnie Freeman is just leave him alone. Sooner or later he'll take another fall and then he'll be back in prison where he belongs."

Jane stared at the former policeman. "That's it? That's the only advice you can give me?"

"That's it," Masters replied indifferently. He glanced at his

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watch. "What about your no-show?"

"Harry Keller. He's still a no-show."

"Violate him before you quit for the day. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand. Thanks for your time."

Jane walked back to her office, the Arnie Freeman file still in her hand, wondering: *Am I winning or losing here?*

Tony Chavez and Mr. Fuentes arrived at the home of Harry Keller's ex-wife, Marie Grey. Tony rang the bell several times before Marie finally opened the door several inches. He saw at once that her expression was strained, frightened. Before either Tony or Fuentes could speak, she said, "He—he isn't here—"

Suddenly the door was jerked open and Keller leveled a gun at them.

"Get in here—quick—move!"

Inside, Keller waved the gun irritably at Tony.

"What the hell are you doing here? Who is this guy?"

"This guy's a friend, man," Tony said. "Where the hell did you get that piece?"

"I had it stashed in some stuff my sister was holding for me. I asked you what the hell you're doing here, man!"

"Looking for you, that's what, trying to find out why you didn't show up for your first parole report."

"No reason to show up, man!" Harry snapped. He was a slight, homely man, one of life's losers. "I'll be going back to the joint anyway, probably to Death Row this time, because I'm gonna waste my sweet ex-wife's new husband just as soon as he walks through that door!"

"Come on, Harry, don't be a chump, man—"

"I know what I'm doing! Any son of a bitch that would steal a man's wife while he's locked up in the joint deserves to get it right in the gut!"

Marie stepped toward him. "Why him, Harry?" she asked defiantly. "Why not me? I'm the one who done it to you!" Marie was no prettier than Harry was handsome, but she had a wholesomeness that Harry lacked. "Shoot me, Harry!" she challenged. "Why pick on my husband?"

"He's the cause of it," Harry said doggedly. "He's the reason for it."

"No, Harry," Marie said, in a tone that suddenly went softer, "he's not the reason. You want to know the reason, the real

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reason? Let me show you, Harry—"

Marie stepped into a small bedroom and came out carrying a little boy with reddish hair, about two years old, who was sleeping soundly.

"This is the reason, Harry. I wanted a home for him, a father for him—to take the place of the real father who wasn't here."

Harry Keller's mouth dropped open. He lowered the gun. "You mean—? This kid is—mine?"

Marie nodded. "I found out I was pregnant right after you got sent up. That's why I didn't come to see you all those months; I didn't want you to worry. Harry, please believe me, I never thought you'd make parole this soon or I might have waited. But Walt came along, and he liked me, and he liked little Harry—"

"Little *Harry?"* Keller looked like he had been slapped in the face.

"Sure," Marie shrugged. "What else would I name him?"

Shaking his head dejectedly, Harry dropped back against the nearest wall, as if unable to continue standing without support. Tony stepped over and casually took the gun from his hand. Fuentes in turn took it from Tony. "You're on parole, too," he quietly reminded him.

Awhile later, as he was about to leave with Tony and Mr. Fuentes, Harry said to Marie, "I'd like to meet this Walt guy sometime. He sounds pretty up-front."

Marie touched his arm. "When you're settled, Harry—settled and making it okay—come around. I want the boy to know you too."

Fuentes drove them downtown to the parole department. On the way, he said to Tony, "You've got a job if you want it, working for ELACON. We don't have a real big budget, but I can get you a room somewhere, arrange for you to have your meals at a taco joint next door, and give you some kind of allowance for spending money whenever possible."

"I'll think about it," Tony said, throwing him a disdainful look. Then he turned to Keller in the backseat. "Man, you a lot of trouble, you know that? I was planning to get laid today and now I've wasted the whole afternoon looking for you."

"Sorry," Keller mumbled sheepishly.

At the parole department, Betty stuck her head in Jane's door and said, "You'll be the last one out tonight. Turn off the waiting-room lights and lock the door, okay?"

"Lights and door, got it," Jane replied, waving good night.

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In the quiet, still suite of offices, Jane went to a vending machine and got a diet soft drink. Back in her own office, she kicked her shoes off, put her stockinged feet up on the desk, and sat back, kneading a headache with her fingers.

As Jane sat there, the waiting-room door quietly opened and Arnie Freeman came silently into the reception office. Jane thought she heard a noise, listened intently for several seconds, then shrugged it off. Arnie moved soundlessly along the corridor toward the only office still lighted. Presently he was in the doorway, staring at Jane's propped-up legs. After a moment, Jane felt his eyes on her and turned. Seeing him, she jerked her legs back, startled, knocking her soft drink to the floor.

"I came back to see you," Arnie said. "I want you to help me solve my problem."

"Of course," Jane said, trying to regain her composure. "Come in, Arnie."

"Don't call me Arnie," he said. "Call me Lee."

"Lee?"

"Yeah. Arnie's that fool who used to commit thefts when some woman teased and upset him. I'm Lee. When a woman upsets me, I take it out on a woman."

Jane saw his left eye begin to twitch. *Oh my God.* She swallowed dryly. "Uh—sit down—sit down, Lee—and we'll talk."

He shook his head. "No. Talking never helps. That's all everybody wants to do—talk. The prison shrink, the counselors, you halfway people: talk, talk, talk. That's not what I need."

He moved closer to her. She rose and stepped back from her desk, stumbling over her shoes as she did. "Arnie—I mean, Lee—maybe you'd better come back in the morning during regular office hours—"

"I can't wait. I've got to solve my problem now. Here. With you." He reached over and switched off the overhead light. The office became dark except for a small circle of light from a desk lamp.

As he kept moving forward, Jane backed as far away as she could, until she was in a corner. She bit her lower lip as he moved up in front of her and put a hand on one of her breasts. He began to squeeze. "I'm going to have to hurt you a little," he said, almost apologetically.

"Then I guess I'll have to hurt you too, kid," Jane muttered, almost to herself. She drove her right knee up into his groin and jabbed her right thumb into his left eye. Doubling over, Freeman stumbled back in pain.

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"You bitch—!" he yelled.

Jane rushed past him to the door, and as she did, the office overhead lights suddenly came back on. Standing in the doorway was Roscoe, the ex-Dark Warrior, a menacing frown on his face.

"You okay, Miss Wright?" he asked, taking a tentative, threatening step toward Freeman.

"Yes, I'm all right—" Jane caught her breath. "I'm all right. Thank you." She got between the two, stepped over to the half-crouching Freeman, and reached for his hand. "Lee—"

"I'm Arnie," he said quickly. "I don't know anyone named Lee."

"All right—Arnie. I want you to sit down over here while I make a phone call."

"Who are you going to call?"

"Someone who'll make arrangements for you to go away for a while."

"Where, to prison? Back to prison?"

"No, I don't think so. Probably to a kind of hospital. You've got to have help, Arnie. You know that, don't you?"

"Y-yes—"

Arnie began to cry. Jane put her arms around him and led him to a chair. Then, with Arnie under the watchful eye of Roscoe, she went to the phone.

After Arnie was taken away by two white-coated medical attendants, Roscoe explained why he came back.

"I got to thinking about that idea of yours: paying back the victims. So I went to see this old white dude that owns a bakery we tore up one time. I told him I wanted to pay him back for whatever he lost, whatever his insurance didn't cover. The guy was, like, totally shocked, you know—but he listened to me, dig? He heard me out. Then he did a funny thing. He shook hands with me. Even said I could come to work for him and he'd teach me to become a master baker someday. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's wonderful," said Jane. "I'll bet your girlfriend's family will think it's wonderful, too."

"Right on. Like you said: a new image. Don't know how those young bloods in the 'hood are going to take it, though: a bad cat like me baking cookies and bread."

"Explain it to them, Roscoe. If you can make them understand what you're doing, and *why*, it might help keep them out of prison."

"I'll give it a shot, Halfway Lady," Roscoe said with a wink.

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As Roscoe was leaving, Tony Chavez came in with Harry Keller in tow. "Still time for this bozo to check in?" he asked.

"Sure, why not?" Jane replied with a shrug. Will Masters had said to violate Keller if he hadn't come in before she quit for the day—and she clearly hadn't quit for the day.

Tony waited in the reception area while Jane processed Harry Keller's report papers. When she was finished, she walked with him out to the reception area and she and Tony watched him leave.

"He seemed kind of nervous," Jane said. "Did you have any trouble with him?"

"Trouble? No, no trouble," Tony replied. "Nothing I couldn't handle, anyway." Tony glanced away for a second, then asked, "So how was your first day as a halfway woman? Any problems?"

"Problems? No, no problems," Jane said. "Nothing I couldn't handle, anyway."

They exchanged knowing looks and both smiled tentative smiles.

"There's a coffee shop around the corner," Tony said. "How about a cup?"

"Sure."

Around the corner, in a booth next to a window, with mugs of coffee between them, Tony said, "I can have that job at ELACON if I want it. Mr. Fuentes says the council doesn't have much money, but they'll give me a room, arrange for my meals, and give me a few dollars pocket money when their budget can stand it. Personally, I think I'd be crazy to take it."

"You're right," Jane agreed. "You can probably find something much better. At ELACON you'd be doing a lot to help other people, but you wouldn't be getting anything for yourself. Plus the fact that since ELACON works so closely with the parole department, you'd probably end up doing a lot of boring jobs for me—like you did today." Jane fixed her eyes on him across the table. "You'd have to be a fool to take a job like that."

Tony met her stare. "Right. I'd have to be a fool to take a job like that."

They raised their mugs and simultaneously sipped at their coffee, turning to look out the window as the city outside began to grow dark. Neither of them said anything else until they were ready to leave.

Neither of them had to. ●

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In Defense of Mrs. Wilbur

by Donald Olson

Mrs. Wilbur, whose life before her husband died had been less than a treat, cherished the independence she'd enjoyed for the past seven years. She could come and go as she pleased and on Fridays it was her pleasure to leave her little apartment on Lexington Place and drive to the Stowbridge Mall, do a bit of shopping, have her hair done at the Alto Stile Salon, and end the afternoon with a leisurely nutritious dinner at the Market Cafe.

Her purchases were few and never extravagant: household items, maybe a pretty scarf or blouse or bottle of scent at the Bon Ton; rather than toting them around, she would deposit her purchases in one of the lockers just inside the mall entrance nearest to the Alto Stile Salon. This routine never varied any more than did the other habits to which she'd become comfortably attached; if they added up to a life of uneventful dullness, well, who wouldn't welcome such a life after putting up with Salem Wilbur all those years.

What happened on this particular Friday afternoon produced an emotional effect like that of a jarringly discordant note disturbing

Donald Olson's stories have a quiet charm that derives, we believe, from their unusual placing of characters with old-fashioned values in settings that force them to confront contemporary dilemmas. Certainly this is true of his new tale for *EQMM,* in which a lady of otherwise impeccable principles decides to take some liberties with the law. We will be bringing you more Donald Olson stories later this year. ¶

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the familiar pattern of a favorite piece of music. When Mrs. Wilbur arrived at the bank of lockers she was mildly dismayed to find them all in use, or so she thought before spotting a single locker near the floor with its key still in place. As she stooped and inserted a coin in the slot, another woman charged through the door and rushed up to the lockers with the air of someone two minutes late at a bus stop.

As Mrs. Wilbur deposited her packages in the locker and was about to shut the door, this other woman, younger than Mrs. Wilbur and wearing a plastic raincoat and rain bonnet, cried out excitedly: "Oh, damn! They're all taken. What a nuisance."

Mrs. Wilbur removed the key and stood up. "I'm afraid I got the last one."

"The movie starts in three minutes!"

Mrs. Wilbur, who usually knew what film was playing at the Mall Cinema, said, *"Grumpier Old Men?"*

The woman stared at her rather wildly and said, "What? Oh . . . yes."

"Not my cup of tea. I lived with a grumpy old man for twenty years. Why watch them on the screen?"

The other woman appeared too distraught to appreciate the humor of this remark. "The thing is, I never take my bag with me into the theater. A friend of mine once had hers snatched in a movie theater."

As if expecting a purse snatcher to pop up behind her she glanced around at the glass doors, beyond which rain was now falling heavily, then turned to Mrs. Wilbur with a beseeching look. "Will you be at the mall long?"

Failing to anticipate the woman's next question, Mrs. Wilbur replied that she would be there another couple of hours at least.

"Oh, good. Would it be a terrible imposition to ask if I might put my bag in your locker? I wouldn't enjoy the movie if I had to worry about some creep grabbing my bag."

Mrs. Wilbur gaped, not knowing what to make of so extraordinary a request. "Well, I don't know . . ."

"I'd be ever so grateful. I know just by looking at you you're a trustworthy person." The woman shot another glance behind her and then at her watch.

To such an appeal what could Mrs. Wilbur reply? She could see no harm in saying yes. The poor girl did seem genuinely upset. Mrs. Wilbur had never been too good at judging character by a

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face and usually relied on other evidence. This young woman was wearing very good shoes and carried an obviously expensive handbag.

"Well, all right, if you wish. But you must meet me here at six. No later. If I'm not home to feed my cat at six-thirty on the dot she can be extremely naughty."

"Oh, that's perfect. I'll do some window-shopping after the movie and be back here at six. You're a dear."

"Six, precisely," said Mrs. Wilbur, opening the locker. The woman deposited her big brown leather bag after first removing a change purse, thanked Mrs. Wilbur once more, and rushed away, heels clicking on the terrazzo floor.

"Well, I never," thought Mrs. Wilbur, who seldom had even so slight an adventure as this, yet feeling rather warm inside at having done a stranger a favor. Judging by the young woman's desperate air of urgency Mrs. Wilbur could well believe she was the type to imagine purse snatchers around every corner. And it flattered Mrs. Wilbur to be instantly recognized as a person anyone could trust.

At the Alto Stile Salon she instructed the girl who usually did her hair to go a bit lighter on the rinse, and then sat back to reflect on what had happened. She hoped the woman was enjoying *Grumpier Old Men*. Mrs. Wilbur herself preferred a good suspense film with a touch of romance and not too tricky a plot. She thought about what she would order at the Market Cafe and of how pleasant it was not to have to cater to her late husband's gastronomic whims. Not that her cat was any less finicky. Mrs. Wilbur often wondered why she hadn't got rid of the cat after Salem's death. After all, the beast was Salem's pet and every bit as moody and hard to please.

The cat's name was Witch, a long-haired pure-white Angora. Despite her aversion to the touch of strangers she was not, as Salem constantly insisted, a bad witch. She was a good witch, a white witch, and he would fawn over her as he never fawned over Mrs. Wilbur, who had been forced to tolerate her husband's malicious wit and had learned to respond with only a despairing sigh to Salem's unfunny jest to friends about his sharing his life with a witch and a bitch.

Regarding herself in the mirror, Mrs. Wilbur nodded approval of the way Roxanne had done her hair. The subtly blue-rinsed waves of baby-soft hair complemented her proud features and somewhat

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melancholy blue eyes; and yes, the young woman had been right, it *was* a face anyone would be inclined to trust.

Dinner at the Market Cafe, with its forest of potted plants and hanging baskets, was as enjoyable as ever. Mrs. Wilbur ordered Chinese and as she nibbled an egg roll decided that life was still worth living despite the ever-increasing need to economize. For instance, she could no longer, as she'd once done, drive down to Rye and take the train into Manhattan for a day's shopping on Fifth Avenue. Salem Wilbur had left her a pile of debts and no insurance.

With time to kill Mrs. Wilbur browsed through a couple of shoe stores and then proceeded to the bank of lockers. Rather to her annoyance, for it was almost six, the woman was not in sight. Mrs. Wilbur crossed to the restroom, freshened up a bit, and returned to find the woman still not there. Oh, well, she thought agreeably, only the cat was waiting for her at home and *Jeopardy* didn't come on for another hour.

The buoyantly gay mood in which she'd left the Market Cafe soon evaporated, while some mysterious spice in one of those Chinese dishes kept coming back on her. She felt like a fool pacing up and down in front of the lockers, but she knew it would be pointless to trudge all the way down to the cinema to look for the young woman.

The rain outside had thinned to a spiritless drizzle. Other people trickled in and trickled out but no sign of Miss Frantic, as Mrs. Wilbur had dubbed her, recalling the strained voice and nervous flutter of false eyelashes. A half-hour passed, then another fifteen minutes.

Talk about inconsiderate! I'll wait till seven and that's it, Mrs. Wilbur decided. I'm leaving. But when she opened the locker and fished out her packages she was in a quandary as to what to do about Miss Frantic's bag. Like it or not, Mrs. Wilbur was left feeling responsible for the troublesome creature's property. She simply couldn't walk away and leave it in the locker. Later she would ask herself why she hadn't left it at the mall office or lost and found department, wherever that might be, yet somehow the idea hadn't seemed quite comfortable to her at the time. Perhaps she didn't find other people as trustworthy as they found her.

Slipping her own and Miss Frantic's bag over her arm, she scooped up her parcels and charged out of the mall, ducking her head against the rain and hastening to her car. As soon as she

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was home, she decided, she would look in Miss Frantic's bag for some identification and give her a call, even offer to deliver the bag herself, along with a piece of her mind.

Mrs. Wilbur lived in one of the older apartment buildings near the top of Lexington Place. There was no elevator, and after climbing three flights of stairs she was out of breath and even more out of sorts. She dropped the bags and parcels on the hall table and made straight for the sideboard where she poured herself a small glass of restorative sherry, ignoring the reproachful gaze of Witch, perched atop the back of the chintz-covered sofa in front of the window.

After switching on the TV and feeding the cat, Mrs. Wilbur put the kettle on for tea and sat down in the chair beside the telephone with Miss Frantic's bag in her lap. She was feeling better now and conscious of a mounting curiosity, quickly disappointed as she discovered no wallet or anything else which at first glance might have revealed Miss Frantic's identity.

Apart from the usual items found in a woman's handbag there were only a bundle of letters tightly bound with twine and an envelope out of which spilled several snapshots apparently taken on the deck of a small boat and all of Miss Frantic and a fortyish well-built man in swimming trunks. Miss Frantic wore the briefest of scarlet bikinis and Mrs. Wilbur found some of the poses shockingly risqué.

The letters were addressed to a Mandy Royal, 23 Lily Pond Circle, Stowbridge; there were no return addresses. Although it cannot be said that Mrs. Wilbur would have refrained from examining those letters, for by now her curiosity was boiling like the tea kettle, she could not have done so without cutting the twine.

Mrs. Wilbur delayed further action until she'd finished her cup of tea. It puzzled her why Miss Frantic, as she still thought of the woman, was so reluctant to carry her bag into the theater. Seemingly it held nothing of monetary value, though the bag itself was an expensive one.

Mrs. Wilbur opened her phone book and was pleased to find Mandy Royal's number. Actually, the listing was for M. Royal but the address was 23 Lily Pond Circle, a street unfamiliar to Mrs. Wilbur.

Assuming that Mandy Royal must be Miss Frantic, she dialed the number and was about to hang up when an answering

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machine responded: *This is Mandy. I'm not available now but if you'll please leave your name and number . . .*

Mrs. Wilbur gave this information in what she hoped was a clear tone of reproach. "I waited at the mall for an hour, most inconvenient, but you never showed up. I have your bag and would appreciate your calling me and arranging to pick it up."

Mrs. Wilbur was in the habit of retiring no later than ten o'clock and was vexed at being obliged to delay her bedtime when Mandy Royal still hadn't called by eleven. It was all very mysterious and annoying and when she did climb into bed it was with the intention of making no further phone calls but of seeking out the Lily Pond Circle address next morning and delivering the bag with the discreet suggestion that she really ought to be compensated for all the bother the incident had caused her.

Morning arrived and still the phone did not ring. Mrs. Wilbur bathed and breakfasted and fed the cat, whose surly mood matched her mistress's, and was deciding what to wear when someone came to the door. Callers at any hour, but particularly so early in the day, were almost as rare as butterflies in a blizzard; the first thought that popped into Mrs. Wilbur's head was that it must be Miss Frantic. But surely, even though she might have gleaned Mrs. Wilbur's address from the phone book, she wouldn't arrive before calling.

The man at the door was tall and broad, with a rich, ruddy complexion and a shock of graying white hair. He introduced himself as Detective Lieutenant Grabow of the Stowbridge Police.

"Dead?" echoed Mrs. Wilbur when the detective, seated on the chintz-covered sofa, revealed the purpose of his call.

"Murdered. Strangled to death sometime yesterday afternoon in the Mall Cinema."

Mrs. Wilbur hadn't suffered so appalling a shock since her husband had keeled over dead from a heart attack at the dining-room table.

"Yours was among the messages on her answering machine, Mrs. Wilbur. I'm hoping you might be able to fill in some of the missing pieces. How well did you know Miss Royal?"

"Good grief, I didn't know her at *all.* A total *stranger.* I was putting some purchases in a locker at the mall when she accosted me. Well, that's not quite the right word. She was most polite about it. Asked me if she could stow her handbag in my locker—

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the others were all taken—while she went to see *Grumpier Old Men.*"

"Didn't it strike you as odd? A total stranger trusting you with her handbag?"

"Well, of course it did," she retorted, faintly offended at what she inferred to be an accusation of irresponsibility on her own part. "Very odd indeed. But I could see no harm in doing her a favor. She was so very—agitated."

Grabow adopted a more sympathetic tone. "No need to be alarmed, Mrs. Wilbur. We have the perpetrator in custody."

"Someone saw him do it?"

"No, but for once we got lucky. We'd no sooner identified the victim when a silent alarm came into the station from a house on Lily Pond Circle. The responding officers caught a guy ransacking the house. Within hours we had him nailed as the killer. Hired killer, as it turned out."

Never in her life had Mrs. Wilbur experienced, or ever dreamed of experiencing, such a moment of high drama. Murder? Hired killer? A policeman in her own living room? Like something out of TV. Drawing her housecoat more tightly about her and shooing the cat away from her legs she thought to offer the detective—such a gentleman he was—a cup of coffee. Rather to her surprise, he didn't say no.

Mrs. Wilbur's curiosity was now rampant and the detective seemed not disinclined to satisfy it. Over coffee he became quite chatty.

"No reason to keep you in the dark," he confided. "It'll all be in the papers later today. By midnight we had the whole story. This Mandy Royal seems to have been a—well, let's say a lady of easy virtue. She'd been having a lengthy affair with a certain local politician with congressional ambitions. When he tried to dump her she turned nasty. Threatened to expose the affair to his wife and to anyone else who would listen. Apparently she had all the evidence she needed to back up her story. Unfortunately for her, she tried to blackmail her lover. Offered to sell him the evidence for a hefty payoff. Rather than shell out, the politician hired this lowlife in New York. To get the evidence *and* to silence Mandy. According to the creep we have in custody, the Royal woman agreed to hand over her evidence in exchange for cash but insisted it be done in a public place.

"At the theater Mandy made a fatal mistake. She told this guy

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the evidence was in her bag in a locker there at the mall, but she couldn't get at it until six o'clock. That's all he wanted to know. He strangled her and searched her body for a locker key. Easy to do, cuddled up to her in the dark theater. He didn't find any key and figured she'd tried to pull a fast one. As soon as it was dark he broke into her house hoping to find the evidence there. Just his bad luck that Mandy Royal had a good alarm system."

Enthralled by all this, Mrs. Wilbur found her coffee had gone cold by the time she thought to lift the cup to her lips. "This—evidence. Did he say what it was?"

"Pictures, letters, possibly a video. That's where you come in, Mrs. Wilbur. You found her name in the bag, I assume?"

Rather than admit she'd even opened the bag, Mrs. Wilbur fibbed. "Well, actually, she'd mentioned her name. I found it in the phone book and called her when I got home. All I got was the answering machine."

"Now you know why. May I have the bag, please."

"Oh dear, Lieutenant," Mrs. Wilbur appealed to him, "I won't be involved, will I? My name won't get in the papers or anything like that, will it? I couldn't bear that. I'm a respectable widow. I had no idea.... All I did was do a favor for a stranger."

Grabow smiled understandingly. "I'm sure you needn't worry, ma'am. One might say you were just an innocent bystander. No one has to know you had any part in what happened."

"Oh, what a relief. I couldn't face it, you know. I truly couldn't."

"If you'll just fetch me the bag . . ."

"It's in the bedroom. If you don't mind, I'll get myself dressed while you're finishing your coffee."

In her dove-gray silk with the lace collar, a dress usually reserved for funerals but which Mrs. Wilbur thought appropriate for a visit from the police, she presently returned and handed over the bag. Grabow gave its contents no more than a hasty glance before rising.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilbur. I hope I haven't upset you too much."

"Well, I won't say you haven't upset me, but you've been most kind about it, and that I do appreciate."

When he was gone Mrs. Wilbur found that she was trembling so badly she could hardly remove the cups and saucers for fear of dropping them.

"Well, I never," she murmured. And then, remembering yesterday: "Poor Miss Frantic."

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She looked down at the cat, whose passive gaze betrayed total indifference to Mrs. Wilbur's emotional distress.

Two weeks passed before Mrs. Wilbur paid another visit to the Stowbridge Mall, this time by invitation. At a corner table in the Market Cafe she regarded with a demure expression of uncertainty the smart-looking young woman across from her.

"My only condition, you must understand," said Mrs. Wilbur, "is that you must not reveal where they came from."

"I'm sure you can trust our discretion," promised the young woman, who was an investigative reporter on the local newspaper. "We never, *never* reveal our sources."

"I wouldn't dream of doing this, you know, if I didn't need the money quite desperately."

"The price you put on them is more than reasonable if the other letters are as juicy as the one you sent me."

In defense of Mrs. Wilbur it must be remembered that she was an ordinary human being, neither better nor worse than anyone else and no more immune to the pressures of the giant marketplace the world has become, where the guilty and the innocent sell their secrets to satisfy the ravenous appetite of the media and the public. Their secrets, or someone else's.

At the end of the meal, which Mrs. Wilbur had found especially enjoyable as she was not obliged to pay for it herself, the reporter handed an envelope across the table. Mrs. Wilbur tucked it in her purse with a faint, ladylike air of embarrassment, as if it were a soiled handkerchief. She then handed a key across the table.

"As I've said, I can't tell you how or why Miss Royal entrusted me with the letters. She was by no means what you would call a close friend."

The reporter, who found Mrs. Wilbur to be a gracious and endearing little lady, looking like somebody's grandmother in her dove-gray dress and steel-rimmed glasses, smiled warmly as she pocketed the key, amused that Mrs. Wilbur would choose this cloak-and-dagger ritual in handing over the letters. A lifelong diet of Agatha Christie, perhaps?

"I can see why she would trust you, Mrs. Wilbur. You're one of those women one instinctively trusts."

Mrs. Wilbur accepted the compliment with one of her sweetest smiles. "So people tell me," she said. ●

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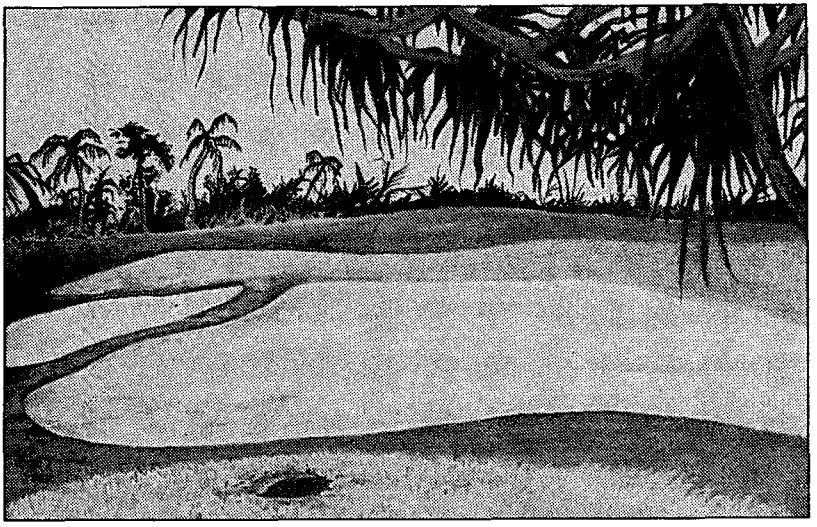

Art by Steve Cavallo

CLUB CHAMPION

by Suzanne Jones

Al Stevenson lay tangled in his bicycle in the drainage ditch on the road from the ferry to the residential complex of low Quonset huts. There was no moon, and the night was oily black and as warm as a dog's breath. The luminous hands on his watch (which appeared still to be functioning) indicated that it was just after nine. He was swallowing his moans and trying to work more of his body into the sand at the bottom of the ditch since—having survived the accident—he had no wish to have his throat slit. Not three feet away from him were two conspirators deep into plotting what sounded to Al like an assassination.

He had regained consciousness to their urgent whispers as they stood with their bicycles on the oiled surface of the intersection. One of the voices seemed vaguely familiar. Somebody's servant, or maybe someone who worked at the club. Or the plant. Al strained his ears to place him while trying not to breathe.

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"I was an oil-field brat," writes author Suzanne Jones, "living in Arabia and Sumatra when I was a child. (I was in five different schools before I completed the second grade.)" Ms. Jones employs the settings of her childhood very effectively in this new story about a golf club in which two of the members compete for more than a low score . . .

Al's Malay wasn't the best. He knew enough of the language to get around, but most of the Indonesians working at the plant or club knew more English than he did Malay. The problem with the language was that it didn't seem to have very many verbs and those it did have didn't have any tense to them. Yesterday, today, tomorrow didn't seem to matter very much in this part of the world. Still, there was no mistaking that the men were planning something very nasty. Communists, probably. Though the communists in that part of Sumatra hadn't been much of a problem to date.

It was 1951, in the dry season, and the Standard Vacuum Oil Company of New York and New Jersey was pumping riches out of that part of Sumatra just as fast as it could. The communist nationalists seemed to make up the majority of those few who had little appreciation for the millions of American dollars pouring through President Sukarno's hands. The trickle-down had not yet reached them, or much of the rest of the population, and if it never would, that was hardly the fault of the Americans, who were only there to get the job done and were political only when they had to be.

They had built a refinery and a movie theater within the confines of a Dutch settlement, and across the Musi River just outside of Palembang had carved a challenging eighteen-hole golf course out of the jungle. They had expanded the original settlement over the surrounding swamp by filling it in with sand and Yankee can-do and erecting a high fence around the entire compound to keep out predators.

The Americans were not much resented (except by the communists) since they were far more agreeable than the Dutch, who had enjoyed the fruits of imperialism for so long as to have become arrogant, but who had mostly been rooted out by the Japanese during the war and been interned and/or shot. With their numbers diminished and generally disadvantaged, they no longer had much

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of an effect on the native population. They had founded the settlement on the (now) American side of the river to stockpile the raw rubber from their great plantations until it could be loaded on freighters to be carried downriver to the Java Sea. It was the Dutch who had put in the ferry across the Musi to access the native markets in Palembang where they provisioned themselves. And though the ferry was a great improvement over sampans, the Dutch were not much appreciated now that they were almost powerless.

On the other hand, the Americans seemed to be well liked. After all, their oil company provided many jobs for people who could do little more than harvest rubber, make batik, carve wood a little, and dance. The natives worked in the plant, cooked the Americans' food, made their beds, did their wash, and kept their houses clean, and were paid well to do so. Occasionally there would be some unpleasantness having to do with native women, but many of the Americans brought their families with them, and these were but isolated incidents. Even the communists seemed to accept if not enjoy American largesse and had heretofore confined the expression of their discontent to the occasional scraggly demonstration and sporadic meeting, which were but poorly attended.

The single most disagreeable aspect of building the American housing on a swamp was that swarms of voracious mosquitoes were omnipresent. Rather than move to higher ground across the river, the Americans combated this problem during the dry season by sending two large trucks throughout the compound every evening to lay down mosquito-killing clouds of DDT as thick as London fog. It was this fog which had disoriented Al (that and the four or so gin and tonics he had enjoyed at the club before setting out for his quarters) and tumbled him into the drainage ditch.

The concrete ditch was one of a pair which edged each road on either side throughout the camp. Bone dry this time of year, it was three feet deep, four feet across, vee shaped, narrowing to two feet at its bottom where Al now painfully rested in a nest of metal. The ditch easily concealed Al and the bicycle, but he nervously slid his hand over the face of his watch, lest it betray his position.

He couldn't have lain there stunned for more than a few minutes. The assassins must have met at that intersection just as the fog was dissipating, settling into the ditches and the low places, shortly after he had his mishap.

He recognized only a few of the words: *ceremony* or *ritual, the championship*—or maybe *champion*—*death.* Now shocked into a

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painful sobriety, he pondered the words, trying to fix their order in his mind.

At last he heard the whir of spokes and the creak of metal diminish with distance, and after another moment or two he sat up and peered cautiously over the edge of the ditch. The night was starless as well, and he could see nothing on the road in any direction.

He pushed the wreck of his bicycle off him and clambered out of the ditch. His elbow was bloody and his pants leg was torn, and he was afraid he had broken his left wrist. He held it tenderly as he plodded back up the road toward the plant and safety and the doctor.

It was farther than he thought, but eventually he came on the doctor's bungalow and saw that it had a faint light on. The bungalow was just one of many perks the company bestowed on its lone physician. Al supposed it had to, to get anyone to leave the States to practice over here, even if there was no income tax. So the doctor rated one of the bungalows they had purchased from the Dutch—like the plant manager's, only not quite as large. Still, it was luxurious for a single man, especially when compared to the Quonset huts of the rest of the American workers. But Al didn't much resent it, or the doctor, who seemed like a regular joe, if a bit too full of himself.

Winning had that effect on some people, and the doctor had been club champion for the last four years. He was almost a handsome man, with a long slab of jaw and intelligent eyes. Al did resent a little the time the doctor could spend on the course while the rest of the members had to toil away in the plant. Al felt that there were more gifted players than the doctor, but the hours he could spend practicing had to make a difference.

Connie Sweeney, for instance, had a sweeter swing and could drive the ball twenty yards past anybody else in the company; however, his short game was erratic, and that's where all the scoring was. But Connie's wife was so far childless and demanded most of his spare time. Hadn't got into bridge like some of the other wives. Connie seldom even got to stay after a round and enjoy the drinks he had won. Tonight had been an exception. Al had left him there with the other members of the foursome still going at it, to cross the river and make his sorry appointment with the ditch.

Al banged on the door of the bungalow and thought he heard voices. He stopped banging long enough to listen, and after a

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moment or two the doctor padded to the door, peered out, and then stepped back.

"God, you're a bloody mess," he said mildly. The doctor led Al to the back of the house where he had his surgery.

"Fell off my bicycle. I may have broken my wrist. Lucky you were at home," Al muttered, his eavesdropping momentarily forgotten as he slid onto the end of the examination table.

He now noticed that the doctor was without a shirt and barefoot. "Kind of early to be turning in, isn't it?" Al asked.

The doctor bent over Al's knee. He had a long, white, hairless back, spotted with tiny moles and sporting a few red marks on his shoulders.

"I was entertaining," he said absently as he cut away Al's pant leg to reveal the wound. "The lady was just leaving."

Al wasn't very surprised. It had to be hard on the doctor, his being a single man and still under forty, and there wasn't another single white woman in the camp unless you counted the manager's secretary, who was older than dirt. However, there were plenty of married women in camp who were bored out of their minds, and as long as the doctor was discreet—and he was—Al didn't see the harm.

"I think I broke my wrist," Al repeated in case the doctor had forgotten.

"Heard you the first time. I don't think so. It's just a bad sprain. I'll x-ray it if you like, but it's a waste of time. I'll wrap it up for you, and it should be fine in a couple of weeks. You'll miss the tournament, of course. You couldn't drive out of your shadow dinged up as you are."

Al was a little put out at the doctor's cavalier attitude. It wasn't the doctor's wrist.

"It's a shame," the doctor continued. "You'd have had a real shot at winning your flight this year."

Al smiled thinly as the doctor busied himself in wrapping Al's wrist. "Like they say, there's always next year."

"It's the elbow and knee that should concern you," the doctor said with professional severity. "You can get an infection out here faster than you can say 'Alka-Seltzer.' Lose an arm or a leg. I've put some sulfa powder on them, but if either starts acting up, you get yourself back here in a hurry."

Al's knee did sting and felt swollen, his elbow numb. He felt friendlier toward the doctor the longer he fussed over his wounds. Al then recalled the conversation he had overheard and told the

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doctor as much as he could remember of it.

The doctor looked up at Al from where he was applying a loose gauze bandage on the knee. His gray eyes were thoughtful.

"I suppose they must mean the club championship this weekend," he said.

"Rotten luck," Al said. "You yourself would have to be the favorite, even with your handicap." Which Al felt privately was higher than it ought to be. Al was tournament chairman this year and was taking more of an interest in such things than he usually did. Besides, even the doctor realized that Al could have had a real chance to do well this year, and Al's disappointment was making him a little cantankerous.

"I suppose the manager will want to put it off until they can get to the bottom of it," Al continued. His satisfaction at the doctor's obvious discomfiture was tempered by the number of hours he had already spent organizing the tournament. Now wasted.

"I shouldn't think so. No," said the doctor firmly, "we're coming to the last of the dry weather. If we don't do it now, we'll not do it this year."

He didn't add that they were hardly going to cancel one of the premier social events of the year based on a nebulous conversation overheard by a man drunk in a ditch.

"Then I wouldn't be too keen on winning it again," Al retorted, a little hurt by what the doctor was thinking. "If I heard them right, they're going to blow away the club champion—right at the presentation ceremony." Or maybe next year's presentation ceremony. Or last year's. Such were the difficulties of the language. "Ostentatious bunch of bastards," he added.

The doctor unbent and wiped his hands on a paper towel. He looked hard at his patient.

"Don't go spreading this around, Al," the doctor said. "You'll just get people all stirred up, and so far it's just a rumor. Let's go talk to Plant Security in the morning and see what our options are."

Al nodded and eased his way painfully off the table.

"Let me get some shoes on and find a shirt, and I'll give you a ride home. You ought to stay off that leg tonight."

The doctor had the enviable use of the company station wagon, which doubled as a VIP taxi and ambulance. Apart from the DDT trucks and the fire truck, it was the only motorized vehicle on the American side of the river. The doctor threw his bicycle in the back, and told Al he should be fit enough to use the bicycle in the morning. The doctor would walk the short distance to the plant to

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talk to Security and pick up another bicycle there. Al should meet him at Security at eight o'clock the next day.

Al was pleased to get the ride home. He hadn't ridden in a car since he'd taken a taxi in Bali on local leave, and that was months ago. (He didn't count the ramshackle old bus on the Palembang side of the river which shuttled the golfers to and from the dock and the course.) He hadn't been back to the States for almost a year now. He was coming to the end of his second tour, but he supposed he'd sign up again for another two-year stint. The money was good, and he didn't mind the work. Besides, if he went back to the States and Helen found out about it, there would be hell to pay. And alimony too.

He worried sometimes that he'd wake up when he was sixty and realize that all he'd have to show for the last decade of his life was a dream of blue rain slanting across the soccer field they had inherited from the Dutch (which the Americans now used for softball games), a blur of ferry rides over muddy water, emerald fairways, Coca-Cola made from mixing carbonated water and syrup from red and white tins (a concoction which always tasted flat), the minty taste of gin, and people with hot brown skins who smelled like cinnamon and sandalwood. Helen always said he wasn't imaginative enough to do anything else or be anything else. He'd found his niche.

Still, if life didn't seem very remarkable or important, it had never seemed dangerous apart from the occasional snake on the course which sent the caddies flying in all directions, or the ferry in the rainy season when it lunged against the cables like something gone mad. Or the occasional mishap with the bicycle which always seemed more comical than serious.

He had never given much thought to the Indonesians. They usually just did their jobs and surely cooked better than he could. He had roomed with Connie Sweeney before Connie's wife came out. Now Al was on his own, and though he liked the younger man well enough, he preferred living by himself. He got lonely once in a while, but there was a lesson to be learned from his relationship with Helen.

Now that his wounds had been tended to, the conversation he had overheard in the ditch was making Al more and more uneasy. Not that anything was likely to come of it. He knew that people usually talked more than they actually did, and he doubted that the Indonesians were any different from anyone else, but it reminded Al that the way things seemed was not always the way

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things were. The Indonesians he dealt with every day seemed friendly, anxious to please, and tolerant of him and his fellow Americans. He now felt as though he had lifted up a rock and found something unexpectedly dangerous beneath it. He wondered if behind their smiling eyes they all felt like the two men on the road whose conversation he had overheard.

He had his houseboy fix him a large gin and tonic and had drunk half of it before he suddenly set it aside. What if Alea was a communist? And if not his houseboy, then his cook? Al knew Kameal was active in the loose union that provided household services, and everyone said that the union was communist run. What if his own servants felt like the two men on the road? It was an uncomfortable thought, and between that and the pain from his injuries, he didn't get much sleep that night.

His knee was so stiff the next morning that he had to push the doctor's bicycle for the first hundred yards before his muscles loosened up enough for him to pedal. It was almost eight and the sky was cloudless, the light so defused that it seemed not to come from the sun, but radiated as from a great, burnished bowl above him, pressing him against the ground. The heat came roiling up from the oiled road like hot cotton, pushing into his face and throat and lungs.

He passed one of the Dutch women, her face red with the effort of the bicycle, her pale arms billowing out of her sleeveless shirt, armpits unshaven, heavy thighs pumping slowly, returning from some errand before it got too hot, mistaken in her timing.

The Dutch had been too long in this exotic and unfamiliar place, and though they had changed over the years, adapting as best they could, they now found themselves caught up short at the end of an evolutionary branch as they ceased to serve a useful function. Al supposed that technology, the process for making synthetic rubber which had been developed during the war, had doomed them more surely than the Japanese. Now they were not enough changed to live comfortably in this place, but were too altered to return to their spare, chilly homeland. In Amsterdam Al had seen them sweep the cleansing water over the sidewalks in the mornings before they opened their shops, stolid, industrious people with an exacting god. Here the years of heat and rain seemed to have softened them around the shriveled sticks of their souls. Al sometimes wondered what they said to each other. If they had anything to say to each other.

His shirt was stuck to his back long before he passed the doc-

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tor's bungalow and came to the gate of the plant. The native sentry, there in uniform, cheerfully waved him through as usual. As he did with all of the white men. Al supposed the old joke had a grain of truth in it: The Americans all looked alike to him. The guard only stopped a few of the Indonesian workers to check their papers, and only those whom he didn't immediately recognize. Or whom he disliked.

Al leaned the bicycle against the wall of the Quonset hut which housed Security, and went inside.

The doctor was there ahead of him and immediately inquired about Al's injuries before getting him to repeat his story to Donovan, who was head of Plant Security. The doctor's concern somewhat mitigated his patient's envy of the doctor's cool, neat appearance. Al was sweating like a pig, and it was still early.

Donovan also was sweating, despite a rotating fan which sat on the corner of his battered desk, but which only served to stir the warm air, which this close to the refinery reeked of petro-chemicals. He was a large, hairless man with a face like an eraser, pink with crumbs of skin like rubbings from errors, which he brushed away impatiently from time to time. He listened to Al's story with bulging, boiled eyes.

"You don't know who they are? You can't describe them?" The thin patina of friendliness with which Donovan had greeted Al had disappeared at the prospect of canceling the weekend festivities, and the man didn't even play golf.

Donovan's right arm ended cruelly in a polished-steel, bifurcated hook which opened and closed by means of wires running up his sleeve. Various speculations had been advanced for the loss of the member, but no one Al knew had yet dared to ask him how the misfortune had occurred. Al had known him—seen him, been aware of him—for almost four years, and these were the most words they had ever exchanged. Donovan was also on single status (though he might have had a wife somewhere—it was rumored he did), but he kept to himself, preferring to drink with his subaltern, who was a native.

Al shook his head. "One of their voices seemed familiar, but I haven't been able to place him."

He rather resented that Donovan seemed to regard the threat to the tournament as his fault. No one wished more than Al that he hadn't tumbled into that ditch and heard what he now wasn't so sure he had heard. It seemed so unreal. Maybe it was only the drunken fantasy that Donovan seemed to think it was. The doctor

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at least was taking him seriously. But then, the doctor surely had to be at risk, his being the favorite to win Flight A for the fifth straight year.

"I'll have to report this to the manager," Donovan said stonily and nudged some bits of skin from his jaw with the curve of his hook. "See what he wants me to do about it."

The doctor and Al got to their feet.

"I'd keep this quiet if I were you," Donovan said and looked at Al, who felt himself flush. The doctor's discretion, the head of Security seemed to take for granted.

"I won't say anything," Al said. He almost wished he hadn't told anybody in the first place.

The manager, as the doctor had predicted, declined to cancel the championship tournament. He did, however, authorize an increase in the number of security guards who were to attend the festivities in an official capacity. Not that Al thought they would do much good if something really were going to happen. None of them carried guns.

The presentation was always held on the outdoor patio at the rear of the club, which was the only place large enough to accommodate all the members and their guests. Beyond it was the eighteenth green and fairway, which were flanked on either side by dense jungle, as was most of the course. The narrow strips of rough were cut to be just long enough to keep the ball from dribbling into the jungle. For if a ball was driven into the jungle, it was deemed unplayable and lost, whether it could be located or not, and a new ball put in play at the spot from which the old had been struck. And because of the snakes, no caddie could be required to attempt to retrieve the first ball. Local rules. There were a lot of lost balls.

The proximity of the jungle, the openness of the setting, made a mockery of tightening security. The gunman—Al assumed the assassin would use a rifle—could station himself almost anywhere out there in the dark at the edge of the trees and have a clear shot at the platform from which the trophies were presented.

As a concession to the possibility of the seriousness of the threat, Donovan dictated that no additional lighting was to be provided for the awards platform, and the trophy presentation was to precede the dinner—while there was still a little light—instead of following it, as was customary. The cocktail hour beforehand would be shortened to forty minutes. All in all, a puny effort. But that was Al's opinion. At least they had done something.

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The next few days were busy ones for Al. His primary function at the plant was to compile monthly production reports for the manager's assistant, a man who was drunk by ten o'clock most mornings but who was rumored to have New York connections which were evidently strong enough to keep him in his job, year in and year out. He had been the manager's assistant for as long as Al had been there. Now, with his tacit agreement, Al spent most of his time on the tournament. By Friday morning when the first players in Flight C teed off, he was tired but content with his efforts. The tournament was his responsibility. Security was Donovan's.

Though his injured wrist prevented him from competing, Al decided to marshal Flight A himself, and limped around the course with the first foursome, which included the doctor. The doctor was playing well, if unspectacularly, and easily won his match. He and Al had exchanged no more than the barest of greetings since their meeting in Donovan's office, but then, Al had been so busy with the tournament, with its hundred and one details, he hadn't wondered about it.

Connie Sweeney was playing as erratically as ever, but that was well enough for him to win his match as well. Al expected that on Sunday, if the seeding held up, Connie would be playing the doctor for the club championship.

Al sought out the doctor as he was dressing after he had won his match on Saturday. He looked around to be sure no one would overhear before he asked, "Do any of the other players know about—well, you know," he said as he continued to look about him.

The doctor finished lacing up the shoe he had been bent over. He slipped on the other and stomped his foot noisily on the cement floor of the locker room to settle it before raising it to the bench and bending over its laces. "Not so far as I know," he said.

Al was unhappy. "Don't you think they have a right to know?"

"Right?" The doctor frowned. For a moment both men were silent. "Why?" he asked. "Do you think it would make a difference in their play?"

Al looked at him.

"They might not choose to play at all," Al argued, "if winning means a bullet through the brain."

"Oh," the doctor shrugged, "they're going to play all right—come hell or high water. If you tell them, you'll only make a bunch of guys so nervous they couldn't hit water if they fell out of a boat. And for nothing at all. It's probably nothing."

Al frowned. It probably was. But what if it wasn't?

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Still, he didn't know what effect such a disclosure might have. He tried to put himself in Connie Sweeney's place. Would he withdraw? Of course not. Would he try to place second? Of course not. The doctor had a point.

"It just seems to me to be unfair for the other fellows not to understand what's going on."

The doctor looked at him with his intelligent gray eyes. "Unfair to whom? As far as I know, I'm the only player who knows. I suppose the added security at the awards tomorrow is going to draw some attention, but that will be after the competition is over. It's a burden I would gladly share if you insist, but I don't see any purpose to it."

Al finally—if reluctantly—agreed and wished the doctor luck for the final day of competition.

Still, he wasn't feeling too good about it. He felt even less good about it when he saw Laura Sweeney brush by the doctor at the entrance to the clubhouse. Al couldn't see her face, but the doctor's was impassive. His eyes followed her lush figure possessively as she climbed into the old bus with her husband.

Al felt as though the air had been sucked out of him. The doctor and Laura Sweeney? He couldn't be sure, but . . . the doctor and Laura Sweeney?

He tried to calm himself. Everyone knew about the doctor's affairs. Even some of the husbands. But he embarrassed no one. He was always discreet.

But Al instinctively knew that this was different. This had a serious edge to it. There had been something frightening about the impassivity of the doctor's face. The expression there had not been flirty. Or teasing. Not like he was with the others. Not at all.

Al went into the bar and had a double gin and tonic and tried to gather his thoughts. Was the doctor keeping silent about the threat to the club champion for some reason of his own?

Al wondered where the doctor's houseboy had been when he had come to the bungalow that night. Could he have been one of the men on the road?

Was the doctor planning to win his match tomorrow or lose it?

Al prudently stopped after his second double, got on the old bus, which had by then returned, crossed the river, and bicycled to his quarters. He was trying to think of nothing at all. Soon it would be all over. Tomorrow the club championship would be decided.

But before Connie Sweeney teed off Sunday afternoon, Al took

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him aside and told him about the conversation he had overheard from the ditch.

Connie just looked at him with wide clear eyes. "So what are you telling me, Al? You telling me not to win? What kind of horseshit is this? Did the doctor put you up to this? I can take him, Al. I can feel it. This is my year!"

Al felt an overwhelming sadness. He liked Connie. Connie had always been square with him, and Connie should have his chance. What Connie's wife was doing with the doctor was none of Al's business.

When the two men teed off in the championship flight, Al was there as marshal, along with the other officers of the club and interested parties, which made up a gallery of about twenty people, not including caddies. There wasn't a security guard in sight.

The match was fairly even, with good golf being played by both men. Connie's extra distance off the tee was offset by the doctor's greater accuracy around the greens. Momentum swung back and forth until on the sixteenth hole, when Connie put his drive into the jungle and went one down with two to play.

But Connie evened the match with a long birdie on seventeen as the doctor missed a four-foot putt. As they drove off the eighteenth tee, the match was even.

The eighteenth was a long par five, a dogleg to the right around a swamp and up a gentle hill. Connie hit a towering drive, but it was to the right and poorly placed with the swamp between his ball and the elevated green, which was over two hundred yards away. The doctor hit his ball down the left side and laid up in the fairway between the swamp and the jungle, some eighty yards from the green.

The smart money in the gallery was betting Connie would also have to lay up, which would swing the advantage back to the doctor with his superior short game. But Connie took out his five wood, and with a calm, fluid swing, sent his ball over the swamp and bouncing onto the green twenty feet from the pin. He looked back at Al and winked as if to say, "I've got him by the short hairs now."

The doctor responded with a brilliant wedge over the manager's palm which put his ball less than three feet from the pin. If Connie two-putted, and the doctor sank his putt, they'd go to extra holes and sudden death.

As they trudged up the narrow fairway, the gallery crackled with anticipation. Bunches of money changed hands as each bet his favorite. A crowd had gathered at the eighteenth green and

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broke into applause as the players walked onto the green.

Connie missed his eagle by six inches. He then exercised his prerogative and holed out. The doctor's face was impassive as he stood over his putt. He stroked the ball squarely but too firmly, and the ball lipped out. There was a moment of stunned silence, then applause and cheers as the doctor shook Connie's hand.

Al couldn't bring himself to shake the hand of either one of them. He felt old, and his legs felt like wood. He managed to pay off the caddies and congratulate them for a job well done. Then he went into the men's room and was sick. He didn't know what would happen at the awards ceremony, but he was pretty sure what the doctor hoped would happen.

Al missed the cocktail hour—well, the forty minutes allotted to winners and losers alike. He was busy along with the other scorers, numbly going over the cards and adjusting scores according to handicaps. He readied the trophies for Flights B and C, small, not very impressive compared to the huge silver-plated trophy which every year went to the club champion. Perhaps he looked a little enviously at the Flight B trophy which might have been his. He was a better player than the man who had won it, but you never knew what would happen on the course. That's why they played the game.

All too soon as far as Al was concerned, the members and their guests had distributed themselves at the cloth-covered bamboo tables decorated with candles glowing in bowls shaped like golf balls. The sun had sunk spectacularly through a latticework of clouds into the jungle, leaving a black and red sky and a little sullen light, though the heat had not much abated. It was impossible to spray more than the clubhouse and its grounds, and already Al could hear the slap of flesh on flesh and cries of "Let's get on with it and eat and get out of here."

He cleared his throat and went through the lists of people he had to thank, beginning with the manager (who stood and waved negligently to the crowd as he did every year), acknowledged the applause for himself and other organizers of the tournament, and presented the trophies to the winners of Flights B and C from the table behind him.

He thought he saw Donovan standing against the trunk of the manager's palm at the edge of the eighteenth green, but it had grown too dark to be sure.

Al felt naked on the platform as the members came forward to take their trophies and wave them about. Then it had come, the

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moment which had turned his stomach sour and his bowels to water. His voice wavered as he called Connie Sweeney and the doctor to the platform. The crowd seemed not to notice. There were a few catcalls about the doctor's missed putts on seventeen and eighteen, but many cheers as well for the new champion.

Al watched as Connie mounted the platform, his head haloed in the last of the light from the west, his step firm and triumphant. Al felt a rush of tenderness for the younger man. Connie should grow old and have stories to tell his grandchildren. Of how he won the club championship with a shot as splendid as it was brave on the very last hole. The doctor followed a pace or two behind, his face fixed in the rictus which passed for the good-natured grin of the runner-up.

Al felt the sweat running down his collar and down his back. His mouth was so dry he didn't think he could get out the words. Then he was seized with a rare moment of inventiveness, of imagination. The kind of moment during which he had signed up for his first tour. The kind of moment during which he had somehow found the courage to leave Helen.

"And now, members and guests," he said quietly, so quietly that a few members at the edge of the patio yelled at him to speak up, "to present the trophy for the championship flight to this year's winner, I give you our doctor, THE CLUB CHAMPION!"

Al's shout began a startled applause as he shoved the silver trophy past Connie and into the doctor's chest. Al saw the shock of surprise and sudden fright in the doctor's eyes. He wheeled toward the crowd and held the trophy up before him as if to shield himself, but the bullet pierced the metal like butter and tore out his throat.

Al hoped that if in the years to come Connie told the story of winning the club championship to his children or his grandchildren, he would only tell them of the wonderful five wood he hit 210 yards over the swamp and the pressure-packed putts he made on the last two holes of the tournament. The rest of the story was part of the kind of madness that Al was afraid would become increasingly common in this part of the world, and wasn't fit for children to hear.

For that reason and a few others, Al did not sign up again when his contract expired, but went to work for NASA in Houston, writing reports for someone else. He kept up with Connie with the odd Christmas card now and again, but they gradually lost touch, as people will. ●

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For Jeff

by Perry Michael Smith

The telephone rang and Alva flicked on the bedside lamp and answered. "This is a collect call," the electronic voice declared, "from . . ." There was a brief pause and a raspy authentic male voice announced itself: "Zack." Alva rolled over onto her back and closed her eyes. "If you will accept the charges, please press . . ." She glanced at the clock next to the telephone. A little after two A.M.

Alva punched the "1" on the telephone cradle and waited through a series of tones until another artificial voice had thanked her for using Bell Atlantic.

"Hello? Hello?"

"Hello, Zack," she said.

Two, nearly three years had passed since she had heard from this man. Not since the coroner's jury. She assumed that a prison term may have intruded upon their association, such as it was. "What do you want?"

"Listen," the young man said. "Thank God you're home." She could hear tears, or the simulation of them. "I'm really strung out. It's so damned cold out here, I'm on the streets, and I don't know where to turn." She heard him hawk and spit. "You have to help."

Alva sank deeper into the pillows. She didn't speak. After a pause, Zack said the one word she had heard too many times in her life.

It has been more than twenty-five years since Perry Michael Smith's fiction last appeared in print. In the years following publication of his first novel, *Last Rites* (1971), by Scribners, until his recent retirement, the author's time was taken up with his duties as an Episcopalian priest to a congregation in Washington D.C. Mr. Smith's literary career might be said to have begun earlier, however, for he was the editor of the *Lampoon* while a student at Harvard. †

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"Please."

She pressed the bridge of her nose between finger and thumb. An intense misery that she had almost forgotten to be possible began to declare its renewed possession of her. To hear Zack was to remember Jeff, to remember Jeff was to re-experience intolerable guilt, loss, frustration, and despair. Alva was unable to hang up the telephone even as she felt herself being entrapped.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Down at the 7-Eleven by the circle." When she made no response, he gave a gargling cough, then added, "I'm so tired. I haven't slept for two nights."

She believed this, at least. From the cistern of alibis, lies, and confidence games where Zack stored his conversation, he could occasionally draw a truth, and it always concerned a basic need: sleep, food, cash, drugs.

"What do you want me to do, Zack?"

The coughing was louder and crusty-sounding. "Just let me come by. I promise I won't break anything." There was a pause. "I won't steal anything," he added as an essential afterthought, an assurance that Alva found pointless and meaningless. What of real value, after all, was left to be stolen?

"Come on, then," Alva said. "I'll call the desk and tell them to buzz you in."

"God bless you," Zack said. "Thank you, thank you!"

Alva hung up the telephone, swung her legs over the bed, and began to organize her time. He would be here in ten minutes, no less. She had to be dressed, armored, when she faced him. She reached into her wardrobe and pulled out the skirt and blouse she intended to wear to lunch tomorrow and swiftly began to get clothed and groomed, trying to keep the tears from bursting out of the deep caverns of grief she had struggled so fiercely to keep sealed.

Zack leaned against the doorframe, his leather jacket scuffed, a seam on the left sleeve open, his face unshaven, and his body reeking. Despite the years that had intervened, he seemed no older to Alva, forever twenty-two, eternally the same as when he had first come into her life. He must be in his early thirties, but the drugs had somehow managed to act as a preservative, freezing him into a corruption of youth. His features and weight were unimpaired. He looked like an actor playing a role for which he

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had been miscast. He seemed to be someone who was far too handsome and spirited to be a bum, inexpertly made up to pass himself off as one. His hair too curly, his skin too fair and smooth, his eyes too clear and bright.

He stumbled through the doorway. Alva almost believed that Jeff would follow him, come home at last. But that was, of course, absurd. Madness.

"You need a bath," she said. She really wanted to say, You need to be someplace else. You need to have forgotten my address. You need to let me heal or die.

"Oh God. I got beat up," he said, as if this accounted for the odor coming out of his clothes. "They took my money and then kicked me around." Without bothering to look into her eyes, Zack tossed off this declaration that Alva recognized as one of his ready-to-wear fabrications. Instead, he glanced eagerly about, taking his measure of once-familiar territory.

"You haven't changed things much," Zack said. "It still looks like home."

Home. Not his home. No one's home, now. Simply the place where Alva spent her days and nights and tried neither to plunge into past horrors nor contemplate the future void.

"No. I just replaced some of the things you and Jeff stole."

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," Zack cried, and hurled himself onto her sofa. "I think about Jeff a lot." The shoulders trembled in a quick spasm. "I really miss him."

"I miss him too," Alva said. She glanced at the picture of her son, Jeff, that sat on the piano. She wanted to hide it, to protect that face from Zack.

"Listen," Zack said, straightening up and staring at her intently. "I know you must still hate me and everything. But I'm really strung out. I'm sick." He wrinkled his forehead and shook his head. "I don't have anywhere else to turn."

Alva shrugged. "Go to a shelter. Go to a hospital."

"They won't take me anymore. I got trouble with the Medicaid people."

She considered, but only for a brief moment. She needed to get him out of her apartment but there was more to it than merely expelling him. Another more powerful but undefined quandary had to be addressed, and she could not confront it in Zack's presence.

"Stay put," Alva said, and walked back to her bedroom; closing

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the door behind her, she retrieved her purse from the bureau. She pulled out the wallet and extracted five twenty-dollar bills, folded them into a wad, and stuffed them into the pocket of her skirt.

Returning to her living room, she was unsettled to see Zack holding the picture of her son.

"He was good-looking, the devil," Zack sighed.

"Never as handsome as you, Zack." Alva compared the two faces, the one in the photograph pallid and ordinary in comparison to that of the young man who studied it; yet the picture contained an image of what had once been her life.

Zack looked up, his eyes wide with sympathy. He replaced the photograph on the piano and held out his arms and approached. "I still feel so awful about it."

Before he could embrace her, she moved away. "No hugs tonight, Zack. You don't smell like somebody I want to hold me."

He stepped backwards and hid his hands in his armpits. "Jesus, I'm sorry."

Alva walked across the room and signaled him to return to the sofa. Obediently, he retraced his path and squatted on the edge of the cushions.

"What do you need from me, Zack?"

"I'm in trouble, real bad trouble. I'm hooked again, I'm dope-sick, my probation officer has a warrant out for me, and I need a place to stay."

"Where have you been staying?" Alva knew that whatever answer he gave, it would contain a pearl of a lie in the shell of the telling.

"Around," he said. "I got out of prison two months ago, and I stayed with a girlfriend for a while, but she threw me out." He gave Alva a crooked smile. "She said I stole from her."

"Really?" Alva said, and, to her surprise and chagrin, they both laughed. How odd that the indignities and terrors and angers of the past could become the basis of a twisted intimacy, even of a curious communion between perpetrator and victim. Of course he had stolen from his girlfriend, as he had stolen from her.

Alva watched Zack seize on her smile as the signal to begin his pitch.

"Listen, Alva, I know that there's lots of bad stuff between us, but I'm really hitting bottom." Two forced tears trailed down his cheeks into the stubble of his beard. "I've got something in the works to get into a long-range program. I just need . . ."

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Zack's needs were the last thing Alva wanted to discuss. Her needs had been long spent in service to this man's hungers.

"Will a hundred do?" Alva asked. "To get you through to tomorrow?" Five bags of heroin, ten rocks of crack, or ten shots of cocaine. That would keep him.

Zack bounced to his feet. "Oh yeah. I can get myself a room. . . ." Alva shook her head and held up a hand to stop the ad hoc fictions.

"Use it as you need to, Zack," she said. Alva reached into her pocket and pulled out the crumpled bills.

He smoothed and counted them. "You couldn't spare an extra ten for a cab, could you?"

Alva moved toward the door and opened it. "Not tonight."

He divided the twenties and stuffed them in various pockets, a precaution, she remembered, against Zack's rival predators in the streets locating an entire cache at once. Then, pausing only long enough to peck her on the cheek, he shot into her hallway.

Alva closed the door, threw the deadbolt, then moved toward her bedroom. She picked up Jeff's photograph and took it with her. Before she placed it on her bedside table, she carefully wiped it clean of any trace of Zack's touch.

Jeff and Zack had been inseparable, sharing rooms, girlfriends, their lives melded into, as it turned out, a messy tangled unit. Alva remembered the first evening her son had brought Zack home for a formal introduction. She took one look at this sleek, beautiful young man and decided that her son must be gay, and her principle distress was that he had not confided the fact to her. She was wrong, she had misread their bond and its force.

Soon, despite her pleas and his promises, Jeff had dropped out of college; he worked occasional jobs but lived mainly out of his mother's purse and checking account. The night he brought Zack home, the purse vanished. Both young men had piled out of her apartment that evening, snorting and giggling, and when she discovered the theft, she canceled her credit cards and consciously attempted to push a wedge of ice between her heart and her brain, dividing her mind from her love for her son. But time, and fear, had dissolved the division, and her love overpowered her reason.

Alva only suspected drugs after an ugly confrontation with Jeff when he demanded her cash and slapped her, while Zack sat on the couch smoking a Marlboro and watching, bemused but detached. She saw the chemical madness in her son's eyes, and

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had glimpsed the punctures in his arms and on the backs of his hands.

She had borne it and hated it.

From time to time, Zack would disappear, off on his own on some adventure or scam that precluded Jeff. During these breaks, Jeff would straggle back to his mother and she would place him in a clinic or a hospital, each reassuring the other that they both believed he truly intended to make himself well, to return to a life. Whatever Jeff's intentions might have been, Zack's certain reappearances signaled a relapse, a new failure. She fought for her son, but could not win. Alva sat alone at night, both dreading and praying for a telephone call.

Alva did not absolve herself of blame, and that was perhaps as painful as anything else she felt. She possessed more money than she would ever use, and it was no sacrifice to give the boys what they demanded, despite feelings of self-hatred and despair every time she wrote a check or emptied her wallet. She was terrified of what they might do if she did not give them what they asked for. She indulged, intending to protect. Helplessness became her predominant fixation, her absolute self-assessment.

"I'm not a bottomless pit of cash," she kept telling them, but, in truth, for their purposes, she was close to it.

Alva proved her steadfastness when they ran afoul of the law and she hired a battery of attorneys to represent them. Some silly business about a breaking and entering at a pawnshop. Clearly a prank, she had told herself, because they had done it so ineptly. Hadn't she given them enough money? Why would they break into a pawnshop, of all things?

Before the trial, she had called Zack's parents, asking if they could help. Distant, granite-nursed people from New Hampshire, they announced that they had "detached" from their son. "No one can outsmart a drug addict," Zack's mother had declared to Alva. "With any luck, this judge will give us five to ten years of peace and quiet." When she hung up, Alva was more frightened for Jeff than she had ever been before.

Despite high-powered and costly counsel, both boys served time.

Alva had expended those months while Jeff was in prison making twice-weekly visits to the facility in Jessup, Maryland, taking him treats and, on request, cash. She feared for him.

"Poker debts," Jeff had explained. Zack occasionally wrote her a note, and she answered with a money order.

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Zack was released first, apparently more of a model prisoner than her son. At Jeff's request, she moved Zack in with her. "I want you guys to look after each other," Jeff had said, then wept as he held her hands at the table in the visitors' room. "Zack doesn't have anybody, Mom. It will be like having me there."

Alva discovered that this was not precisely true, particularly after two diamond rings and a platinum bracelet vanished between midnight and six in the morning on the second night of Zack's stay. The third night, her electric typewriter left the premises with Zack. She terminated the arrangement that afternoon, leaving his possessions with the desk clerk along with clear instructions that Zack was under no circumstances to be admitted to the building without her prior notification.

"Please," he had said when he called. "Please. I'm so sorry."

So was Alva, but not so sorry that she needed to read tea-leaves to predict the future of their joint occupancy of the space of her apartment.

When Jeff was released from Jessup, he spent less than twelve hours under his mother's roof. "Gotta go," he told her as he put down the receiver from the inevitable telephone call. "Zack's come up with something special." After a ferocious argument, with threats bandied by both sides, he had relieved Alva of a check for two thousand dollars, and gone on his way. He never even came back for the new clothes she had bought him.

Zack called at eight the next morning, his voice wrenching her to a heightened wariness. "Oh God!" he began, breathless. "Thank you for being there. Please. I got beat."

"Beat up?" Alva asked. "I thought you were already beat up."

"No!" Zack declared indignantly. "Beat! I got cheated. They sold me baking powder for the hundred you gave me." She listened to him pant. "Listen, I'm really sick. I need some help. Please."

"I have to go to lunch before I can get to the bank," Alva said. "Meet me at the apartment at three this afternoon."

"Can't you do it now?" he demanded. Then, his voice changed to that of an excited conspirator. "Do this instead: Write me a check. I can be right over."

Alva said nothing.

"Just a couple of hundred," Zack insisted. "If Jeff were around, he'd help. Please."

Please.

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She kept silent for a few more seconds, her thoughts coming fast, an avalanche of soul-smashing boulders. "Yes, Zack, you're right: He would." She forced herself to relax the muscles tightening in her neck and throat. "Come now. Fast as you can."

She seated herself at the secretary, unlocked the drawer that held her checkbook, wrote him a check for a thousand dollars, and tucked this inside her blouse pocket. She checked her balance, assured that it would clear. She would make a call and see that her reserves were kept high. Now, she moved with determination and speed and placed the checkbook in the wall safe behind the mirror in her bedroom. She had scarcely closed the door when she heard the buzz from the desk.

"Send Mr. Burton up," Alva told the concierge.

She waited a very few minutes before she heard his knock on the door. He must have avoided the elevator and run up the emergency staircase. "The door's unlocked. Come in."

Zack, even more disheveled than he had been earlier in the morning, stood heaving breaths and hacking at the door. "Oh, Alva, you've saved my life."

"Not yet, I haven't," she said.

He tumbled into the room and fell on her sofa. "Just a couple of hundred will be fine," he declared.

"Not so fast, Zack. I won't give you a cent until you take a shower and get yourself cleaned up. I am not going to have you seen going in and out of here looking like a common tramp."

"I don't have any clean clothes."

"I still have Jeff's clothes. Some of them are brand new. Never worn. They'll fit."

Zack slipped out of his jacket and she held it at arm's length. "You'll find a disposable razor and an unopened toothbrush in the medicine cabinet. I'll get some fresh things for you to wear and leave them outside the door."

Alva went to the closet in the room that once was her son's, dug out underwear, socks, jeans, and a shirt. Another leather jacket, a cleaner and better-cared-for duplicate of the one Zack had worn, lay on a shelf. Alva lifted it and held it to her nose. Years in the cedar closet had removed the last hint of Jeff's aroma; it was time to give it up. She put it over her arm.

Alva could hear him splashing on the other side of the bathroom door as she folded the clothes and laid them on the floor, under-

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wear and socks on top. The water stopped, the shower curtain pulled back, and the door to the medicine chest squeaked open.

"There's nothing in there stronger than Tylenol, Zack," Alva said.

"I was hunting for the razor!" He sounded grieved, which Alva interpreted to mean that she had read his mind.

The door of the bathroom opened far enough for him to reach out an arm and snatch up the pile of clothes, then shut with a puff of steam. She could hear the water running in the sink and the customary noises accompanying tooth-brushing, interspersed with curses.

She carried the jacket into the living room and draped it over the arm of the sofa next to where Zack had left his own. She picked his up and spotted a name tag inside. "Farley Harrington," it read. She wouldn't even consider how it had fallen into Zack's possession. She dropped it on the floor, resisting the temptation to go through the pockets.

He appeared fresh and immaculate, radiating the cracked purity of a fresco saint. "All cleaned up," Zack said. He smelled of her cologne. Jeff's clothes were a trifle large, but they were new, pressed, and Zack wore them well. The flannel shirt was too broad in the shoulders, but the black jeans fit snugly enough, although there was some puckering at the waist where he had tightened the belt. Seeing these garments on this man stirred something dark and unpleasant in Alva, something worse than a bad memory.

"You said you needed money."

"Oh God, yes." He flailed his arms and paced around the room in circles.

"I'm really sick," he added. "My bones ache, I'm chilling, I can hardly walk." He paused and twisted his face into an expression of agonized indignation. "They robbed me, Alva."

"Zack," Alva said, reaching into her pocket and producing the check. "I have to go to lunch with my sister. As a favor, I don't want you calling me at all hours of the night. Take this. It should hold you for a few days. Don't bother me until you need more help and then make it at a decent time."

Zack was smooth. He didn't reach immediately for the check, but dropped to his knees in front of her, miraculously revitalized.

"You'll see me again? You'll let me come back? You really will?" He reached out and grabbed her hand holding the check, a caress

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in which the transfer was made from her possession to his. "I don't have anybody else anymore, Alva. Just you."

"I don't doubt that, Zack," she said, and watched him take a quick glance at the slip of paper. His lips formed a silent whistle.

"Oh, Alva, this will hold me until I get into rehab. Oh God, thank you."

She felt suddenly very weary. He was protracting this interview beyond any possible excuse. They both had what they wanted, why didn't he leave? "Run on, Zack. The bank will probably call to make sure that the check is good. The faster you cash it, the faster I can get out of here."

Without asking, Zack ignored his jacket on the floor and began pulling on her son's, which she had left on the arm of the couch. "Good fit," he said, his sole acknowledgment of the gift. Then he threw her a kiss and left the apartment with a slam.

"I wouldn't let that parasite, that leech, that human trash can in my house." Alva's sister Doris took a long sip of her manhattan, then slapped the empty glass on the table. "And you've given him money?" She snapped a breadstick in two and then stared at the pieces as if she couldn't figure out what to do with them. "Have you gone insane?"

"No. I went insane years ago, Doris," Alva answered. "We both know that." She kept her voice lower than her sister's, although the bustle in the restaurant certainly would drown out their conversation for any but the most determined eavesdropper.

"You were institutionalized because you needed a rest. Nobody said you were crazy. You were sick with grief, that's what was wrong with you." Doris shook her head. "I don't understand. You gave him a total of twelve hundred dollars in less than nine hours? He's only going to spend it on drugs."

"I suppose so."

"The sheer gall of it, calling you. Asking for drug money." Doris looked around as if beseeching support from the waiters and busboys. "He killed your son!"

"Doris." Alva made her voice firm. "That is not how it happened."

Doris held out her hands in appeal to an unseen moderator. "But he got Jeff the drugs. He kept Jeff on drugs, just to get at your money. He was there when Jeff overdosed and the only thing he could think of to do was run off and leave him to die."

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"I'm going to take care of Zack," Alva said, running the tip of a finger around the rim of her iced-tea glass. "For as long as needs be." Alva put on her glasses, then picked up her menu and deliberated. "The venison ravioli sounds interesting."

"It's depraved and imbecilic. It's demonic," Doris said. "You're a single woman on a fixed income. Maintaining this vampire will cost you a fortune."

Alva kept her eyes on the text in front of her. "I have money, Doris. Jeff's insurance was over a half million. Daddy made sure that both of us were well looked-after, and my ex saw that I have the condo and enough invested to support myself very comfortably. Furthermore, since Jeff died, I've been wholly without purpose." She stared her sister squarely in the eye. "I owe Zack something. He was with Jeff nearly to the end; I haven't forgotten that, none of it. Zack's habit won't bankrupt me."

Doris reached across the table and pushed Alva's menu down. "What is going on with you? You told me when Jeff died that you'd never hated anyone so much in your life. You said he'd destroyed you. The man is a sociopath, a criminal, a thief, and as far as I'm concerned, a murderer. Why, please tell me, why are you doing this?"

Alva tasted her iced tea. "For Jeff." She raised her menu once more. "Now, decide what you want to eat."

Two nights went by without a call from Zack, and Alva used the time preparing for him. She emptied her jewelry from the wall safe, took that and her silver for storage in a bank vault, and sent all Jeff's old clothes out to be dry-cleaned. She had her twice-weekly maid pack up her good china and had the building superintendent take it to her locker in the subbasement. She stripped her tables and display cases of valuable trinkets and antique porcelain pieces and passed them into Doris's care. After careful thought, she revised her will in favor of her nephews and nieces and a couple of colleges, then met extensively with her attorney about measures to be taken in case of her sudden or accidental death. He did not seem surprised. "We all come to a time, Alva, when we have to see to some significant matters before it's too late." She agreed.

Alva did not face the ordeal of readying Jeff's room until everything else was prepared, finally deciding to leave it untouched, the textbooks and trophies and games and wall posters remaining

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where her son had left them. She dusted the table where the stereo system had been situated, before Jeff and Zack carried it off one afternoon. She did not even move the stack of old issues of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* Jeff had secreted under his underwear in a closet bureau, merely (compulsively, she supposed) straightening the pile of magazines before she reorganized the shorts and T-shirts on top of them. When Alva had satisfied herself that her work in the bedroom was finished, she shut the door, leaving it slightly ajar, waiting.

Zack's call came, as expected, well after midnight. Alva had been lying in bed with the lights out but alert and awake, knowing that forty-eight hours would be about the limit for the money she had given him.

"Hey," he began.

"Zack," Alva replied. "How are you?"

"Sort of messed up. The rehab fell through, you know? They said I was ineligible."

He sounded uncharacteristically calm. Alva reckoned that he had used up the residue of the money she had given him within only the past few hours.

"That's too bad," Alva said. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He gave a sour laugh. "Jump off a bridge, I guess."

"No, you won't," Alva said. "You're not the type."

"Listen!" His mood and tone shifted dramatically. "I'm at the end of my rope. No money, no place to stay, it's freezing out here. Some guys are hunting for me."

"The police?"

" 'Some guys,' " Zack shouted. "I owe them money!"

She would issue no invitations, no consolation. He would have to ask. The decision would be his. She said nothing.

"Well, I thought I'd call and tell you goodbye." He coughed loudly into the speaker and she held the receiver away from her ear.

"Are you going someplace?" Alva asked.

"I'm going to kill myself," Zack stated. There was a new snarl in his voice, the glint of contempt for her inability to follow his plan glittering for an instant off the surface of his prefabricated despondency.

"No," Alva said. "You won't." She made the statement so deci-

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sively that he didn't immediately reply. She could envision him scowling into the air, trying to calculate some new course of manipulation.

"Can I come by? See you? I won't stay long."

She made him wait for an answer. She wanted him to feel insecure about her assent.

"Yes," she said at last. "But be quick about it."

When he tumbled through her door, Alva noticed that Jeff's leather jacket had been replaced by a ragged overcoat, undoubtedly retrieved from a dumpster. Although he was unshaven, he didn't smell. Somebody had probably taken him home night-before-last, and, no doubt in return for the favor or whatever, Zack had showered. He was wearing the same outfit she had given him two days before.

"Got to use your toilet," he said, and scarcely acknowledging her, swept past and closed the bathroom door behind him.

For the first time since his initial call, Alva felt a conscious stirring of disgust. She knew what was going on behind that door. She could close her eyes and visualize him sitting on the edge of the bathtub, heating up the mixture in a spoon, the syringe between his teeth, a fragment of cigarette filter lying handy nearby to strain out any undissolved particles when he drew the heroin into the needle.

Her exasperation was not with Zack, but with herself. Whereas she knew precisely what he was doing, she begrudged that closed door. Alva wanted him to be at ease with his habit in her presence, she wanted to see it all, suffer it all, finish it. She walked down the hallway and tried the doorknob. It wasn't locked.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," he yelped as she stepped into the bathroom.

Zack stood shirtless, staring at his reflection in the mirror. She could see the spoon and a cigarette lighter lying on the countertop. He had inserted the needle into a vein at the base of his neck.

"It's all right, Zack," Alva said, pushing the door wide but not moving any closer to him. "I just wanted to see if you needed any help."

He eased the plunger closed, a complacent grin forming on his face. "Wow. Good stuff." He caught her eyes watching him in the mirror. His smirk turned contented and self-enclosed.

On the floor, Alva saw three tiny empty blue glassine bags.

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Zack's use was well along. She wondered how many bags he needed every day now: six, ten, fifteen? How many times a day did his body wail for the drug?

The lids of his eyes sank shut then opened halfway. He stumbled and she took the syringe from his hand and placed it carefully on the edge of the sink. "That better, Zack?"

"Sit down," he said. "I think I better sit down." His face had gone slack and he had difficulty maintaining his balance. Alva took Zack's arm by the elbow and carefully led him to the door of Jeff's bedroom. She eased it open and took him inside. "Lie down," she said. "Enjoy it."

Zack allowed her to guide him to her son's bed and help him stretch out. "Whoo!" he said, his eyelids flickering.

She tugged off his sneakers and left him mumbling to himself about things only he saw or knew about.

In an hour or so, Zack would be able to talk. Alva would tell him some lies, about how she hated to see him suffer, about how much he helped her remember Jeff. She would offer him sanctuary, she would offer him unlimited funds, she would offer him a place to inject his dreams, in any quantity, at any time. She would not allow him to struggle anymore.

And, when they had settled the matter, and Alva had sent him on his way to resupply his hunger, she would begin her vigil. It might be weeks, or months, but certainly not longer than a year. She would encourage and enable him to fill himself past overflowing with his chosen happiness. Then, at the last, making sure that she was at his side, she would perhaps elect, as he slipped forever away, to forgive him for taking her own. ●

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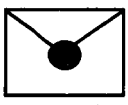

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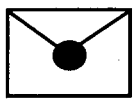

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SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

by William Link

Delores Lamont was dancing deep into the wee hours at the Mocambo when a call came in from the Magician. The Magician was a sobriquet she had given to her favorite cinematographer, Gregor Sandor, who had become world famous for lighting Garbo like a goddess and Harlow like a whore.

Delores returned to her table, still effervescent from the champagne and the tango with her movie-star lover, the legendary Trevor Halston. The maître d' brought the phone to her together with a new bottle of chilled French bubbly. Delores was in "prep" on a new picture, *Dangerous Debutante,* with Gregor as the lighting man, and she was afraid this postprandial call meant something had happened, that he was backing out.

"Oh, for God's sake, find out what he wants," Trevor said. "Only Hamlet's allowed to procrastinate."

A role they'll never let you near, Delores thought maliciously, girding herself to pick up the phone. When she answered she was transformed into her screen personage: brittle, impossibly self-possessed. "Gregor darling—how did you ever track me down?"

His heavy voice was slurred, the "*Mittel* European" accent even more pronounced. They said his mother was a Czech countess, the father a Sebastopol sewer rat. "I must see you, Delores dear."

William Link made his mark in the mystery genre as co-writer with Richard Levinson of many successful mystery programs for television. After the death of Richard Levinson in 1987, Mr. Link went on to help create *Over My Dead Body* and several ABC movies. More recently he has returned to short story writing, the literary form with which he began his career in 1954 in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories.

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"Tonight!? It's almost four, Gregor."

"Tomorrow. I will come to your house."

Her fear went unallayed. "Is something wrong?"

"I must see you."

"Very well. One-ish—so we can both enjoy our beauty rest."

His voice was suddenly very distant. "Yes. You may expect me at one."

Later, as her chauffeur drove them along the Sunset strip, dawn was daubing the smogless sky with all the hot pinks and Navajo reds of a paint box. There were sleep-famished couples waiting for their cars in front of Ciro's and a rowdy group of men in tuxes were staggering down the hill from Preston Sturges's Players Club.

"If you keep frowning like that," Trevor said, "your face will freeze."

"There are no ugly ducklings in Gregor's films. Only swans." But her frown deepened. "He worries me."

"Maybe he wants more money. That's what everything out here comes down to, doesn't it?"

"Trevor, he's paid ten thousand dollars a week." She glanced reflexively over her shoulder. Only a few miles south there were Depression breadlines and festering hobo jungles in the train yards around Union Station. "Besides, he wouldn't bother me with that. He'd pester Stromberg, the producer."

"Well," Trevor said, fitting a Turkish cigarette into an ivory holder, "he isn't the only cinematographer in the world."

"Isn't he?" Delores scoffed. "Did you ever ask Garbo that?"

The next morning she slept till noon under her black satin sleep shade. When she looked out at the day, the San Gabriel mountains stood like a palpable reality, lording it over the insubstantial stucco homes and pallid swimming pools. And how did Delores Lamont fare in this cruel, astringent light? Her tri-mirrored dressing table was an X-Ray machine pitilessly revealing the feet of crow (she was only thirty-two!) and the flakey drying skin under the famous eyes. Thirty-two going on crone-dom. Only the Magician could arrest time, paint with light, banishing blackheads and wrinkles from his demesne. Sometimes he covered his camera lenses with a gauze so fine she thought she could strain tea through it.

She and the cook decided to set the lunch out alfresco near the

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pool, against a vivid wall of bougainvillea, catching the light ocean breezes. The table was set with her best Meissen porcelain and solid-gold dinnerware, cutglass goblets as exotic and fragile as unicorn eggs.

When Gregor arrived she was wearing a long cerulean gown, her strawberry-blond hair brushed shimmering to her waist. The cinematographer was his usual disheveled self: patches of stubble on his cheeks, wild prematurely white hair like Paderewski's in concert. He wore a wrinkled raw-silk suit with an open collar. Male Los Angeleans eschewed neckties and headwear.

He began a chain of cigarettes as the butler brought the consommé. "My God," he exclaimed, "the prelude to a feast and I have no appetite."

"Eat what you desire," Delores said. "We'll throw the leftovers to the coyotes. Sometimes they come down from the canyons at night in packs."

"Like your fans," Gregor laughed. "You are looking particularly beautiful today."

She shrugged, but she accepted the sincerity of his comment. This was the man who had taught her as a young actress always to look for her "key" light. She had learned later that some of the other greats, Greg Toland, Stanley Cortez, focused their genius mostly on the male stars. Gregor Sandor, like Renoir, was in love with the female face and form. She had cleverly coopted him away from her chief movie rival, Rebecca Rivera, with a combination of flattery and flirtation, smothering him and his wife with the luxury of her friendship.

It was only with the arrival of their roast squab and wild mushrooms that he hesitantly approached the reason for their meeting. "I was very drunk last night," he confessed. "I started drinking right after I left the doctor's office—"

Her voice caught in her throat. "Oh Gregor—he found . . . something wrong . . . ?"

"My ophthalmologist," he said. "He has discovered a highly advanced maceration of the retina in both eyes—"

"Which means?"

"I am going blind, Delores. I have maybe another six months of sight."

Her fork clattered on her plate. She reached across and gripped his strong, warm hands, staring into his face. She was suddenly

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aware that he had not removed his dark sunglasses during their meal.

His volcanic laugh was cruel. "Do you and the gods appreciate the irony here? Seeing is my life. Rob me of my vision and I will soon become a frightened old man hibernating in a dark room listening to Schubert symphonies."

She tightened the grip on his hands, as devastated as he was. "You must get another opinion. Doctors make mistakes all the time."

"I have. They look at the test results and concur."

She was shocked into silence, little tendrils of wind stirring his ashes in the ashtray. He was her sun and now, apocalyptically, her sun was going to die out like the red orb that sank every evening into the Pacific. What would she do?

The Magician was smiling. "I suspected something like this a while ago when the first symptoms occurred. So I made preparations. . . ."

She found her voice. "What preparations, Gregor?"

"I began to teach someone my technique. All the little tricks of the trade."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you now. Not until I believe this person is ready."

It had to be someone on his camera crew or one of the gaffers, the sorcerer's apprentices, his little family of self-effacing illusionists. But she knew better than to pry away any of Gregor's secrets.

"Will—will your successor be ready before my next movie starts?"

"Possibly." Now his hand took hers. "You know, Delores darling, that I could never abandon you. And you will never understand my tragic deprivation of someday never to gaze again upon your beauty."

The old-world, heartfelt gravity of his words touched her, almost brought her to tears. Her own words failed her and all she could do was find a harbor for her hands within the warm cave of his fingers. Gregor already looked like a blind man, sitting as stolid as an icon behind his midnight-black glasses.

The following day Delores convinced herself that empathy and compassion were fine sentiments for the silver screen, but self-preservation was a more natural instinct. Trevor called, quizzing

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her about Gregor's problem; she told him it was something boringly domestic.

After lunch her chauffeur drove her to a dreary address on Vine Street near the NBC studios. She wore a dark brunette wig and oversized sunflower sunglasses, her daytime disguise, and she was sure none of the tourists waiting in line for the Edgar Bergen radio show recognized her.

She sat, legs crossed demurely, in the dingy private detective agency explaining what she wanted him to do. He had a face like a fox and Vaselined Valentino-type hair with a pinstripe part down the center. His eyes consumed her like a blue-plate special and she winced, knowing she had been abducted into his sexual fantasies.

He made notes in a little pad. "Everyone he comes in contact with?" he asked.

"Everyone. If he goes to the laundry I want it noted. I take it all of this will be accomplished with the utmost discretion, Mr. Brimmer."

"Of course, Miss Lamont."

She suddenly saw how the Magician would light him: a rodent with blue-black sable fur, a diamond chip of light in each pupil.

To test him, she went to Gregor's office the next day at RKO on Gower and saw him sitting out front in his car. She ignored Gregor's mousy little secretary on her way into Gregor's inner sanctum.

The Magician was staring morosely out the window at the gray group of soundstages that resembled buildings in a prison yard. She wondered how much he really saw with his slowly deteriorating eyesight.

She lied, said she had come in from wardrobe fittings and had stopped by. Usually he would interrogate her about the gowns, the dresses, the accessories, but today he seemed distracted, merely grunting in the empty spaces of her recital.

"Tonight I want to gamble. I hear Zanuck is going to have a poker game and I have been invited to sit in if I choose."

"Will you miss playing cards?" After she said it she regretted she had.

"They say someone has invented a Braille deck. People will play with it providing the blind person does not deal."

She hesitated before asking, "Did you teach your pupil this morning?"

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"No. My 'pupil' has a day of rest today—absorbing the latest lesson."

Without the sunglasses his eyes were milky with little specks of mucus around the corneas. She left before a wave of pity descended upon her; it was better to stay aloof from her emotions, neutral, distant. After all, she had her own future to think of.

Brimmer paid her a visit the next day at her estate. The butler escorted him to the swimming pool where she deliberately wore an abbreviated swim-dress, her long tanned legs stretched out provocatively on the leopard-skin-covered chaise longue.

He read her Gregor's itinerary over the past twenty-four hour period: the office, Schwab's for a late lunch, doctor's appointment, dinner at nine, the Zanuck card game at the Fox studios. In bed by midnight.

"He didn't stop off anywhere?" she asked. "No quick side trips, didn't run in to see anyone on his way to Fox?"

Brimmer shook his sleek head. He had gratefully closed his notebook so he could feast on her tanned charms.

Delores looked down at the terraced hills. There were many palm trees, tall stalks at this distance, with what looked like shaggy green mops on top. The gardener said rats lived up there in the dusty fronds. She thought: nothing so far, but in all fairness he had been only a day on the job. It was then that an idea struck her.

"Mr. Brimmer," she said, dragging his guilty eyes up from her bosom, "it just occurred to me that there is an office in the producer's building right across from Mr. Sandor."

"I don't understand."

"The producer is on vacation, and his secretary never comes in while he's gone, so the office is vacant. You could go in there during the day with a pair of binoculars and monitor anyone and everyone who comes in to see Mr. Sandor."

Brimmer had his notebook out again. "Hmmm. Interesting. What's the name of this producer?"

"Threadgill. Jerome Threadgill. I believe it's room three-oh-four." She looked through her smoked glasses at Brimmer's amused, inquisitive face. "I know for certain, if you're wondering, because I used to visit Mr. Threadgill there when we were having our affair."

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Suffer, little man, she thought. In the totem pole of life I only screw producers and movie stars.

The maid woke her late the following morning with her telephone and an obsequious apology. "I'm sorry, but it's a Mr. Brimmer. He insisted that I wake you."

"Mr. Brimmer," she said to the phone, "this had better be important."

"Get right down here. I think the person you want is with him right now."

When she found him Brimmer was hunkered down at the window, a pair of powerful Zeiss binoculars pressed to his eyes, peering out from a corner of the venetian blinds. She had hastily thrown on a blouse and a pair of Katharine Hepburn-type slacks but no undergarments. Brimmer silently relinquished the binoculars.

She steadied them against the window pane, slowly raking the little line of windows across the way. What sprang out at her from Gregor's office almost gave her a shock, as if she had touched a defective appliance—

Gregor was showing a lens to his secretary—that mousy little girl who seemed to vegetate in his reception room every day. Rhonda. She didn't even know her last name. She was a phantom, a nonentity, with pin curls around a plump puckish face wearing only a minimum of rouge and lipstick.

"That's his secretary, right?" Brimmer asked.

Delores nodded, still fascinated by the tableau framed in the window, like watching a silent film. Now she recalled that the little creature was Gregor's shadow, taking notes on the set, running out to his trailer to get cigarettes. There was a bond between them, invisible, but undoubtedly of umbilical strength. But why would he pick her of all people to share his fount of knowledge?

The answer came the next morning. Brimmer arrived again at the estate with his research, things he had dug up at the Municipal Hall of Records and elsewhere where grubby private dicks, she imagined, burrowed like earthworms.

He read from his ubiquitous notebook: "Rhonda Krupka. She's his niece —"

"Niece?!" She would never have suspected, but then Hollywood was practically incestuous with nepotism.

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"Twenty-five years old. Graduated Cal Tech with a degree in physics. Single. Lives by herself at 5255 Fountain . . ."

Degree in physics. It was possible she had studied optics, hoping one day to follow in her uncle's trailblazing footsteps. But there were no women in the profession; it was a closely guarded male club. But with Gregor's eye disease, the little bitch probably smelled her big chance.

She wrote out a check to Brimmer, adding a hefty bonus, and told him she no longer required his services.

"But I thought—" he began.

"I can handle it from here, Mr. Brimmer. You've identified Mr. Sandor's 'protégée' so your contribution has been invaluable."

A covert glance at the check's amount seemed to mollify him. But he still seemed disappointed, Delores thought, probably because he was losing the opportunity to look down her swimdress.

He left, walking slowly along the length of the swimming pool, folding the check, like a rejected suitor.

Delores leaned back in the chaise longue, mulling over this disturbing new piece of information. There was one thing, however, that she knew for sure: She would never let slip to Gregor that she had discovered the identity of his secret student.

That evening, wearing her brunette wig and sunglasses, she borrowed the maid's broken-down jalopy and went to 5255 Fountain, a relatively quiet street of small apartment houses and residential homes that paralleled the raucous Sunset strip. The dwelling in question was a white brick bungalow with a stone trim and a polished brass plate with a push-button, rather affluent for a secretary. Maybe Gregor gave her money—and she thought for a sick second that the old reprobate was having an affair with her. But no, it was not like Gregor; he was seriously devoted to his wife, his childhood sweetheart.

Miss Krupka, if she was there, never left the house, and by eleven o'clock most of the lights were extinguished.

As Delores prepared for bed herself (a pore-tightening mask in place and two pads of lotion over each eye) her phone rang.

"You've been avoiding me," Trevor admonished.

"I've been very busy. I started memorizing my part in the picture."

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"Really? I passed by your place yesterday and I saw some guy getting into a roadster outside. He looked like a racetrack tout."

Delores laughed. "Must've been that little man who does my taxes. McKenzie." McKenzie had been her science teacher in high school.

"When am I going to see you?"

"Soon. I promise."

"You're not still fretting over Gregor, are you?"

She sighed. "Of course not."

The following night she followed Rhonda Krupka home from the studio. Earlier in the day she had positioned herself again in the vacant office and watched the Magician draw what appeared to be lighting diagrams on a blackboard. Miss Krupka stood by taking notes and answering questions like a first-year college student.

Rain was sweeping down from the canyons, torrents flooding streets that had no proper drainage systems. Miss Krupka ran into the house for a minute and came back out to the car, having grabbed a scarlet slicker and rain hat. She took off in her little Ford coupe, heading into the hills above the strip, the water plunging in deep rivulets down the twisting roads.

Delores kept as close behind as she could, knowing that in such a blinding downpour it would be impossible for the young woman to suspect she was being followed. They moved past a property surrounded by a high fence and Delores thought she recognized the large estate of Mary Pickford.

Higher still—and then the Ford crept through an iron archway and climbed laboriously up a long crushed-stone drive toward an imposing gabled mansion on a hill. Delores braked the car out on the road, her heart starting to pound when she recognized the house. She had never seen it in the flesh (or in the stone) before: only photos in *Life, Colliers, Photoplay,* and the other magazines. It was the palatial retreat of her enemy and bête noire, Rebecca Rivera, a beautiful young lesbian actress who had never suffered a box-office flop.

Delores sat looking out the rain-lashed windshield, willing her hammering heart to return to normal, trying to deal with the consequences of this new surprise. Miss Krupka was no doubt a friend of Rebecca's. She was privy now to all the secrets of Gregor's art and was ready to bring them, after the man went blind, to her friend, leaving Delores literally in the dark. The thought

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infuriated her. She struck her gloved hands against the steering wheel again and again until she felt like an angry impotent child. God, the horrible coincidence of it: that Gregor would entrust all his magic to his niece, who had the Rebecca Rivera connection. It was so unfair she almost cried.

That evening she broke down and went dancing with Trevor, thinking the diversion would buy her some relief. But while the band played a popular new Harry Warren tune and the actor whirled her like a wind-swept leaf around the floor, she was still on Fountain watching the little white-brick house. The house of her enemy. Trevor realized she was depressed, despondent, tried to cheer her up. She claimed it was a migraine brought on by the change in the weather.

Later that night she began the first of a series of anonymous notes, block-printed on cheap paper, threatening Rhonda Krupka's life. She left these notes over the next week in Rhonda's mailbox and even slipped some under the door at Gregor's office after hours. The notes grew in intensity and viciousness until she had delivered almost a dozen of them. Sometimes she laughed as she wrote them, hilariously scandalized by her own perversity.

She invited Gregor to dinner at an *intime* restaurant on the beach. The cinematographer was using a Malacca cane now, moving through life like a man in a minefield.

It was a pleasant enough meal, wavering candlelight, water lapping at the pilings, a strolling violinist serenading secluded couples around them. While they were dawdling over coffee, Gregor, apropos of nothing, brought up his "pupil"—

"She is being tormented," he said, a hand supporting his heavy, leonine head.

"She? Your pupil's a woman?" Delores had to be very careful.

"It's a woman, yes. Her work has been excellent, very heartening. But now she has lost all her concentration. She has become worthless to me."

"What happened?"

"It seems she has been receiving these notes, unsigned, threatening her life."

Delores took one of his cigarettes, leaning calmly into the candle flame to light it. "Does she have any idea who's sending them?"

"No. It must be some insane person. No one else could write such filth. But she is very frightened; it is tearing her apart."

"Has she gone to the police?"

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He shook his head violently. "What good could the police do? Their hands are tied unless someone makes an attempt to harm her."

"Yes. You're probably right."

They sat there, Gregor slumped forward in the booth while the violinist played something appropriately Hungarian and melancholy.

"She is not sleeping. She refuses to come in to the office—her constant companion is fear."

Delores nodded somberly, holding back her inner smile of triumph.

She parked in her usual spot, a zone of deep shadow, avoiding the only streetlight on the block. There was only a dim glow in the front window of the house, probably a lamp. The Ford coupe stood forlornly on the drive so she knew Miss Krupka was home.

Delores had written another note, announcing the time and place of the young woman's pending death. This one, concise and as matter-of-fact as the others, had all the necessary ingredients to push her over the edge into madness or even, if Delores was lucky, into taking her life. Either way, Gregor would be forced to find another student. She knew him well enough to predict that his egomania would overwhelm his grief.

The witching hour came and went on cat's paws. Finally, the light in the window went out and only two carriage lamps burned on each side of the door.

Delores turned the motor on and left the car, darting along the pavement and up the walk to the front door. She slipped the note through the letter slot, holding the latch steady so it wouldn't snap back and make a sound. The note dropped silently down inside like a pebble in a pool.

Congratulating herself on a mission coolly accomplished, she turned quickly away and started to retrace her steps back down the path. It was brighter than she thought because of the carriage lamps and the moonlight but the street at this hour was devoid of cars and passersby.

"Come back!" It was a woman's hysterical command.

Delores whipped around, almost losing her wig, and saw Rhonda Krupka standing in the open doorway. Her hair was a fuzzy dark nimbus and she wore a diaphanous nightgown. "You're the one!" she screamed. "You're sick! You're crazy!"

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Delores ran to her car, holding the wig now in her hand. She flopped behind the wheel, sprawled across the seat, relieved that the motor was running. She released the handbrake, clashing the gears, and stomped on the gas pedal, the car jerking away from the curb. She was horrified to suddenly see that the girl had left the house and was standing like a banshee in the street, arms raised over her head as if she was summoning the wrath of the gods.

Before she could stop herself Delores was plunging the car at the little stick figure: a perfect target in the hazy pollen of moonlight. The right side of the carriage hit the body with a sickening metallic impact, lifting it like a scarecrow and flinging it carelessly over a hedge onto a lawn.

As she tore up Fountain, sweat breaking out like boils on her face, she realized with numbing disbelief that Miss Krupka had not even screamed. . . .

In the morning, a suitably sullen overcast day, Delores told her maid that someone had crumpled the side of her car (probably a parking attendant) and got the address of the woman's service garage in East Los Angeles.

She drove there, impressed with her supernatural composure, leaving the car in the hands of a Mexican mechanic, a little bow-legged brown man smoking a suspicious brown cigarette. If he recognized her behind his dark glasses he gave no indication. She emphasized that she needed the body-work completed as soon as possible and palmed him a hundred-dollar bill.

She lunched with women friends at Romanoff's and checked the afternoon papers for any item about the hit-and-run incident. Nothing.

When she returned home after a carefree round of shopping, she saw the Magician's car parked out front. The maid had settled him with a glass of whiskey and an ashtray on the flagged patio in the garden. His heavy blunt features were grave, stricken, when she sat down with him, somewhat ashamed of the gaudy stack of packages from her shopping foray.

"What's wrong, Gregor?" she asked. "You look like you've lost your best friend."

"I have." He lit one cigarette from another. The waning sun was reflected in his sunglasses like a dying bonfire.

"Are you serious? Who?"

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"My protégée, the one I told you about. The person who was sending her those sick notes came to her house last night to leave another and . . ." His voice drifted away.

"And what?"

His thick fingers reached up behind the glasses to rub his eyes. Was he on the verge of tears? "The person ran her down—like an animal."

Delores feigned shock; it was very natural, something that came easily to an actress. "My God. How do you know?"

"We have the film."

The statement was flat and conclusive, and the words chilled her to the bone. *We have the film.*

He must have read her puzzled expression because he went on: "She told me she thought this person was dropping these notes off after she retired for the night. So I set up a camera on a tripod behind a tree near the front door. There were carriage lamps and bright moonlight and I loaded this new fast film that the Kodak people in Rochester wanted me to experiment with."

She heard herself saying, "And what did the film show?"

"Luckily she had the presence of mind to start the camera when she saw the person leaving." He stopped, removing his hand from behind the glasses, and she was aware of the little drops of moisture on his fingers.

It had become cold in the windless garden. "And the film was developed?" she asked, trying to keep the quaver from her voice.

He was about to answer when the maid came silently out to them. "Pardon me, ma'am, but there are two gentlemen here to see you. They say they are from the police."

She nodded, impassive, as if the woman had only announced that the gardeners had come.

"Why?" Gregor asked. He removed the glasses, his intense diseased eyes, blurry with tears, staring into hers. *"Why?"*

She slid one of his cigarettes from his pack and lit it with a trembling hand. "Because . . . because I was losing you."

The sun sank behind the banks of bougainvillea and eucalyptus, leaving a fretwork of light and shadow, the essence of the Magician's art.

His hand smashed the glowing tip of his cigarette into the ashtray. He tried to make her out in the growing darkness. "Just think, Delores," he said with a weary venom, "yesterday was the last time I ever had the pleasure of lighting you. . . ." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

A Matter of Face

by Hayford Peirce

CRIME WAVE BATTERS TAHITI!

That wasn't quite the headline in the copy of *La Dépêche* that I was holding but it might as well have been. The actual front page of the tabloid-sized paper was all about a Chilean tourist who'd been nabbed by the international airport's new four-legged sniffer as he sauntered off the weekly flight from Easter Island and points east in South America with three kilograms of genuine cocaine in the false bottom of his suitcase.

The story was highlighted by blurry photographs of an empty suitcase, of two smug Tahitian customs officials standing on either side of a large German shepherd who seemed bored by the whole business, and of a scrawny middle-aged character with frightened eyes and maybe forty pounds of shackles and chains attached to various parts of his anatomy as he was led by half a dozen grim-faced policemen into the Palace of Justice.

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I dropped the paper onto my desk with a sigh. What on earth was life in my sleepy tropical paradise coming to? Crime these days was rampant, and definitely on the upswing. Not the way it used to be when, fresh out of twenty years in the Foreign Legion and living in Tahiti on the pension that a grateful French government doles out to ex-sergeant majors, I could leave the keys in my car and the windows open when I left my faithful red Deux Chevaux, now deceased, on the waterfront parking lot a few blocks from my office.

Hayford Peirce is a writer with many interests. Not only does he have two connected series running in *EQMM*—one following the adventures of a Tahitian P.I. and the other Tahiti's *Commissaire de Police*—he often writes for the science fiction magazines and has recently had several stories in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact.*

But *now,* according to the papers, we had:

Dope busts at the airport.

Pot plantations in the hills.

Panhandling and muggings around the marketplace.

Burglaries in the downtown stores, not to mention the daily incursions into beachfront homes of the well-to-do on the Punaauia-Paea gold coast.

A real live bank holdup in the middle of downtown Papeete—with two masked robbers making a dramatic getaway in broad daylight on a bright red motor scooter.

Stolen checkbooks and bounced checks.

Husbands being beaten by their wives.

Outrage to a police officer—a really serious crime under the *Code Napoléon:* talking back to a cop—three months in jail, with two suspended if you were lucky.

Not to mention the dire band of teenagers whose nefarious activity was breaking off the three-pointed stars from the hoods of the island's population explosion of expensive Mercedeses.

Nope, life sure wasn't what it used to be.

Shaking my head in dismay, I propped my bare feet up on my battered wooden desk to frame my third-story view of the old colo-

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nial cathedral and beyond its spire the modern temple of Mammon of the Westpac Bank.

Endless crime, I muttered. And the paper hadn't even *mentioned* the biggest crime of all here in the islands—the outlandish cost of living.

Where would it all end?

But why should I of all people be dismayed by the crime rate? I belatedly asked myself. Didn't the neat little sign I'd carefully epoxied to the side of the building three flights below say:

AGENCE CANEILI
INVESTIGATIONS, SECURITÉ
DISCRÉTION ASSURÉE

Was I getting old? Maybe no longer up to the never-ending struggle against the forces of evil? I considered the notion. A tough old legionnaire like Joe Caneili? That would be the day! I leaned forward and reached for the paper I'd discarded. What else was going on in the world around me?

Not much. Three pages of pictures told me that the election of Miss Papeete would be taking place at the Hotel Tahiti Friday night. Miss Motocross, I knew, had already been selected over the weekend at the Hotel Beachcomber here in Tahiti, and Miss Pamplemousse over at the Bali Hai in Moorea. Miss Surfboard's turn would be coming up in a week or so. I let my trained detective's eye linger for a moment on the salient characteristics of the fourteen hopeful young persons in skimpy bathing suits who were candidates for the title of Miss Papeete, then moved on to the next story.

This was a two-page article about next week's sale at a London auction house of $2 million worth of Polynesian artifacts that had been collected in the nineteenth century by a German baron and amateur ethnologist. His descendants in Düsseldorf had recently come across them and offered them up for sale. Learning of this, the local government here in French Polynesia had loudly declared them part of Tahiti's national heritage and had tendered an offer of unparalleled generosity: a place of honor for them in the local museum, along with a shiny plaque bearing the donors' names.

With typical English phlegm, however, the auctioneers in London had dangled before the baron's descendants the rosy picture of several million U.S. dollars being paid into a Swiss bank. So the collection of old grass skirts, whalebone fish hooks, and intricately

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carved wooden war clubs had been shipped from Düsseldorf to London to be sold to rich Texans.

In today's newspaper various local dignitaries were now expressing their surprise and chagrin at this crass example of unenlightened materialism. It was inadmissible, they declared, that none of these cultural treasures looted from Polynesia had been selflessly restored to the people who had actually created them. There was more along these lines, much more, but I yawned and turned the page to the so-called sports news.

I was wondering for the thousandth time how the dozen tabloid pages devoted to what the French laughingly consider sports could dwell so tediously upon people running up and down a field kicking a round white ball while adamantly ignoring the existence of baseball when I heard a timid knock on the door.

"Entrez!" I shouted in the fluent if unmelodious French that twenty years of camaraderie with Hungarians and Germans in the Foreign Legion will teach you. The door opened and a small middle-aged Chinese stepped into the spaciousness of my twelve-by-fourteen-foot office. I raised my eyebrows hospitably and after remembering to remove my bare feet from the desktop waved him graciously to one of the folding metal chairs on the other side of the desk.

The Chinese sat nervously on the edge of his chair, his shiny black eyes darting from the open newspaper on my desk to the stark furnishings of my office and finally to me. Nothing he saw seemed to reassure him.

His eyes met mine for a moment and he nodded hesitantly. But he still didn't say anything, which gave me a chance to practice my powers of observation on him. I didn't see anything very unusual, just a small Chinese in wire-framed glasses who looked like he might be an assistant bookkeeper for an insurance company. The thin hair that was combed straight back was as black as his eyes, and his skin was a sallow ivory color, as if he didn't get much sun. He was wearing a short-sleeved white shirt with three or four pens jammed in the pocket over his heart and dark blue slacks, pretty much the standard outfit for the Chinese merchants and businessmen who handle most of the commerce in Tahiti. So he probably *did* live from one year to the next without risking the dangers of the sun and skin cancer. Very wise.

"What sort of business are you in?" I asked after a while when it looked as if the silence might stretch out through the lunch hour.

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"Business?" He licked his lips. "I . . . do I have to tell you?"

I shook my head tolerantly. "Nope. You don't have to tell me anything at all. Not even why you're here. Or your name or—"

I don't know if he caught on that I was funnin' him a piece, as we used to say in Bookbinder, Kansas, but with a faint sigh of resignation he let his gaze fall to the tops of his knees and haltingly began to tell me what the problem was that had brought him up the three flights of concrete stairs to the assured discretion of the Caneili Agency.

What it all came down to was a matter of face. Won Fat had been swindled, or at least he thought he had, and he wanted to do something about it without anyone in his family or in the large Chinese community finding out about it. There weren't any Chinese detectives to take his problem to, since there weren't any detectives at all here in Tahiti except the official kind in their commissariat beside the Palace of Justice—and old Joe Caneili in his tiny office across from the cathedral. So that was how he came to be sitting across from me and wringing his hands piteously.

Won Fat was a forty-six-year-old bookkeeper's assistant who had laboriously worked his way up to the post of inventory manager at the largest of the breweries and wine importers in the industrial zone of the Tipaerui Valley. He had a new house in the hills, a three-year-old BMW, two color television sets, and a VCR; also a wife and three whiny teenage children who felt that life was increasingly unbearable without a pool, a Mercedes, and a yearly trip to Disneyland. He also had a wide circle of Chinese relatives and acquaintances who *did* have pools, Mercedeses, and yearly trips to Disneyland, not to mention apartments in Paris and weekend homes on Moorea.

Won Fat grimaced as he told me about his overbearing relatives. He had five weeks a year of paid vacation like everyone else on the island, a mortgage on his house, and an overdrawn bank account. And, unbeknownst to his wife and relatives, two and a half million francs in cash squirreled away waiting for the single shrewd investment that would make him a wealthy man. . . .

He wasn't thinking of that investment when he fell into conversation with a distinguished-looking but half-sloshed American tourist during the noisy festivities surrounding the election of Miss Pamplemousse at the Hotel Bali Hai on the neighboring island of Moorea four nights before.

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But Robert L. Cousins had turned out to be more than just another drunken tourist ogling half-naked Tahitian girls. He was also a well-known anthropologist from Harvard University, one of whose books was actually for sale in the hotel's boutique. At the present time, he told Won Fat as they waited for the round of Aita Maitais the American had just ordered, he was directing a series of archeological digs on the island of Tahuata in the Marquesas group 700 miles to the northeast of Tahiti.

Won Fat had no interest at all in ancient Polynesian ruins or artifacts and the conversation would have quickly languished if Cousins hadn't owlishly asked Won Fat's expert opinion on the upcoming sale of Tahitian treasures in London.

Won Fat remembered the numerous articles in the local papers on this contentious point of local pride, as well as the anticipated windfall of millions of dollars that the sale might bring. His interest perked up, as it always did when large sums of money were being discussed. Later in the evening, while his abominable children were dancing to the hotel's intolerable rock band and his pinch-lipped wife was listening crossly to the details of her sister's last skiing trip to New Zealand, Won Fat found himself sitting in the thatched-roof bungalow the anthropologist had rented for the weekend.

In one hand Won Fat held yet another glass of rum punch, in the other a thick hardback book by Robert L. Cousins entitled *Totemism and Society in the Marquesas Islands.* On a nearby dresser he could see several copies of a smaller paperback called *Sex and Symbolism in Ancient Tahiti,* the book the hotel's boutique had a neat stack of in a corner beside their *pareo* shirts.

Lying casually beside the paperback was a small blue American passport, and when Dr. Cousins lurched uncertainly off in the direction of the bathroom Won Fat picked it up out of simple curiosity. Staring back at him from its interior was a colored photograph of Robert L. Cousins, born August 13, 1939, in California, U.S.A. A moment later he heard the bathroom door opening and quickly dropped the passport to flip instead through the illustrations of his host's *Sex and Symbolism in Ancient Tahiti.*

The eminent American anthropologist collapsed into a rattan chair and with enormous concentration picked up his glass of rum punch. He began to tell Won Fat about the progress of his excavations on the nearly uninhabited island of Tahuata, which centuries before had been a thriving center of Polynesian culture.

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"Shouldn't be telling you thish," he confided in partially slurred English that Won Fat found increasingly difficult to understand, "gub'ment says I'm shupposed . . . supposed to keep it all a shecret . . . secret but we're finding twelfth-century arty . . . artifacts that are absholutely remarkable, absholutely, lutely, lutely, lutely . . ." His eyes had closed and his head was now bouncing up and down against his chest with the regularity of a metronome. "Pottery," he murmured, "lots an' lots o' pottery." His eyes opened and disconcertingly focused on a point just about at Won Fat's right shoulder. "The firsh pottery ever . . . ever *found* in Polynesia!" He began to nod again. "With writing on it, Won Fat, *writing!*" He leaned forward and after two attempts managed to tap the Chinese on the knee. "Ever'one shays Poly . . . Polynesians didn't *know* how to write. So you know what *that* meansh, Won Fat, Won Fat, Won Fat?" His head suddenly slumped inertly to his right shoulder, but his pale blue eyes remained half-focused on the bemused Chinese. "I'll tell you, my friend Won Fat, Won Fat, Won Fat. It meansh that I got millions and millions and *millions* of dollars of pottery and writing up there in a hole in the ground and the nashty old gub'ment here in Tahiti shays they'll throw me in jail if I even *think* of taking even just the teeniest-weeniest little potsherd for myshelf." He raised his head with enormous effort from his right shoulder but was unable to keep it from wobbling from side to side as he leaned forward to clasp Won Fat's knee with both hands. "Ish that *fair,* Won Fat, you really think thash fair . . . ?"

Well, now, I ask you.

How long do you think it was before that distinguished Harvard anthropologist, ethnologist, and archeologist Robert L. Cousins steered the conversation to where the slightly befuddled Chinese heard himself suggesting that maybe, just maybe, they could between the two of them find some way of retrieving a portion, just a *wee* portion, of the fruits of the American's backbreaking labor from the rapacious bureaucrats of the French government?

Or how long it took for Dr. Cousins to reply that this was such an astounding idea that it had never before occurred to him? But now that it had, perhaps with the judicious investment of a few million francs to deal with certain officious busybodies in the Marquesas Islands—and possibly to procure the services of a cooperative yachtsman—this simply *mad* idea of Won Fat's might well prove beneficial to everyone concerned.

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After that point in the evening you can probably write the rest of the scenario yourself.

"So you gave him the two million in cash," I said sadly.

"Two and a half," muttered Won Fat almost inaudibly, still staring down at his knees. "For two million we were going to split fifty-fifty. For another half-million I was going to get sixty percent."

"Great. And when was this sixty percent payout to take place?"

"In the States. After he'd sold the stuff to the Peabody Museum at Harvard." His voice dropped to a hushed whisper of near-religious awe. "He said they'd pay at least a million dollars!"

It was hard to keep from laughing, but I suppose that's the benefit of hindsight. "So he took the two and a half million francs from you and flew back to his holes in the Marquesas?"

"That's what he *said* he was going to do. But then yesterday morning I saw him standing in the Air New Zealand office just across the street from here with a ticket in his hand and it made me stop and think for a moment. When he came out I followed him down to the waterfront and saw him get on a little yacht that was tied up across from Acajou's.

"I asked him what he was doing and he told me that this was where he was staying on Tahiti, that he'd rented it for a month from an Englishman who'd gone off to live with a girl on the other side of the island. I asked him if maybe he could use this boat to smug—to take the stuff to the States and he said, maybe, if he had enough money to buy it from the Englishman. So then I asked him when he was going back to the Marquesas and he said on next Monday's flight and that he'd telephone me from there."

"Okay, so then what did you do?"

"I went back to Air New Zealand and asked a girl I know who works there what he had been doing there and she said he had just bought a first-class ticket for New Zealand." He paused and twisted his hands in misery. "For himself. A one-way ticket."

"It does make you think," I agreed. "So what did you do next?"

Surprisingly, he'd done what any sensible person would have done. He bought a paperback copy of *Sex and Symbolism* from the local bookstore and drove out to the small ethnological museum in Punaauia. There he displayed his copy to the French curator and asked what he knew about its author, Robert L. Cousins. The curator shrugged in the way that Frenchmen are so good at. Not much, he said, aside from the fact that the American Cousins had once written a couple of books about Polynesia but had then been

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foolish enough to die rather young some fifteen or twenty years ago.

"Ha!" I said, surprised by this sudden turn. "So the rascal's *dead,* is he? Then who's this Robert L. Cousins who's selling maps of buried treasure in the Marquesas?"

"All I know," said Won Fat stubbornly, "is that his *passport* said he's Robert L. Cousins." He sat up straighter and rearranged his pens in his breast pocket. "I'm not a *complete* idiot, you know!"

"Hrmph," I said eventually. "And you say no one at all knows about this?" I was dubious; keeping a secret in Tahiti is the most impossible thing I know of.

"Well . . . just my half-brother," he admitted reluctantly. "But *he* won't tell anyone! In fact, he's the one who told me to come see *you.*"

"Your half-brother. Who's that?"

"Emile? Emile Tetuanui?" He batted his eyes at me from behind his wire-rimmed spectacles.

I raised my eyebrows in astonishment. Emile Tetuanui was an enormous brown-skinned customs official who gave you the beady eye out at the package post office at the far end of the harbor when you went to collect your carton of homemade cookies from grandma back home. No one in all the 115 islands of French Polynesia looked more like a full-blooded Tahitian of royal descent and less like this pint-size Chinese on the other side of my desk.

Won Fat must have been used to my reaction. He shrugged helplessly. "Same mother, different fathers."

"I see. So old Emile knows about your problem. And no one else."

He nodded vigorously. "No one else."

"Except Robert L. Cousins."

He grimaced. "And Robert L. Cousins."

I leaned back in my chair and let my gaze wander from Won Fat to the cathedral just across the street and then on to the Westpac Bank. If my pocket calculator was working correctly, at today's exchange rate at the temple of Mammon two and a half million francs would come to a tidy $29,083.86.

"I suppose this Robert L. Cousins we've got here in town must have discovered that he had exactly the same name as a reasonably well-known Polynesian anthropologist and then started looking around for some way of generating some extra pocket money from it," I mused aloud. "Tell me this—what kind of French does he speak?"

"French? Not . . . not very good at all. I heard him trying to talk

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with one of the waitresses, but then he just gave up. He had a terrible accent."

"Okay," I said with a soft sigh. "Let me think about it."

"But today's already *Wednesday!*" protested Won Fat. "He's leaving for New Zealand Friday evening! That's only two days away!"

"That's what I've got to think about," I said, rising to my feet. "Where can I reach you?"

The Chinese gave me a brewery card with his name printed on it and then reluctantly wrote in his home telephone number. "But please," he begged. "My wife . . ."

"Remember what the sign says down below?" I demanded as I ushered him firmly out the door. *"Discrétion assurée*—that's me."

With a bleak nod, Won Fat made his way down the staircase.

My office was practically across the street from the Vaima Commercial Center that housed half a dozen restaurants, a movie theater, an assortment of gift shops, and what seemed like a million stores selling black pearls from the local lagoons. Won Fat was in the wrong business, I reflected as I stepped into the hot, muggy air of the Place Notre Dame, adjusted my broad-brimmed plantation hat of gleaming white pandanus against the sun's maleficent rays, and took my life in my hands by stepping out into the insane flow of Papeete's traffic. If he'd been peddling black pearls like every other Chinese on the island seemed to be doing these days, he could have been swindled out of twenty-five million instead of a measly two and a half. . . .

The other side of the Vaima block faced the U-shaped curve of the harbor. Tied up to the sidewalk that ran along the waterfront road were the first of several dozen smallish yachts that had come from all over the world for the privilege of listening to the din of Papeete's ceaseless traffic.

The Retro Café on the corner of the block had a dozen or so outside tables mostly filled with American and Japanese tourists. It also had a fine view of the small green and white boat Won Fat had told me was Robert L. Cousins's present domicile. The little craft seemed far too dinky to dignify with the word yacht. An open hatch at the rear of its cabin told my trained eyes that its tenant was home, or at least somewhere nearby.

I settled into an empty table, readjusted my hat at a rakish angle, and tried to make myself as touristlike as possible. A listless Tahitian waitress took my order for a cup of coffee and a ham

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sandwich on baguette—heavy on the mayo, easy on the mustard—and I settled in for what would undoubtedly prove to be an entirely fruitless surveillance.

Somewhere on the horizon beyond Papeete's harbor—eleven miles to the northwest to be precise—was the splendid dinosaur-shaped outline of Moorea's jagged peaks. But with the never-ending stream of cars, trucks, backhoes, and jitney-buses inching their way along the waterfront it was almost impossible to catch an occasional glimpse of its profile, let alone spot the object of my surveillance.

I was, in fact, almost miraculously lucky that when Robert L. Cousins finally did step out on deck it was during a temporary lull in the hellish traffic. I saw him clearly for a few brief moments, a dapper little middle-aged gent with thinning gray hair, a deep tan, bare feet, a gaudy red and white *pareo* shirt, and tattered blue shorts. In other words, a typical Tahitian yachtie.

Then he had locked up the hatch to the boat's cabin and had jumped lightly to the sidewalk, where he moved rapidly out of sight past the rest of the yachts in the direction of the towering shade trees by the town's main post office.

As soon as I was sure he was well gone, I rose to my feet and once again pitted my legionnaire's skills and nerves against the local traffic. When I emerged on the other side I was standing just beside the diminutive craft that Robert L. Cousins temporarily called home. On its blunt stern was painted WAYFARER, BOURNEMOUTH. I nodded absently; the ship's owner was supposedly English, and Bournemouth, I recalled vaguely, was somewhere on the English Channel.

As had become usual these days now that the local petty crime rate had caught up with and largely surpassed that of the rest of the world, there was nothing at all anywhere on the *Wayfarer* worth stealing. A shiny new padlock dangled from the hasp on the tiny hatch that led into the depths of the ship. I felt my upper lip curling in scorn. Any one of the jobless Tahitian teenagers who littered the waterfront and the Vaima Commercial Center could pick open that particular model in twenty seconds or so—ten, if they had any inkling of the two and a half million francs that Robert L. Cousins might well have hidden aboard.

From the equally small boat next to the *Wayfarer* came a loud, querulous male voice. It was speaking English of the purest Australian variety and was quickly answered by an equally vehement

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female voice also speaking genuine strine. I swung around and pretended to be studying Acajou's restaurant across the street, as if wondering if I could meet its bill for lunch. A moment later, deep in thought, I darted back into the noontime traffic.

The voices from the outback had put me in mind of the Australian yachtie who had arrived a few months earlier in Papeete on a boat even smaller than the ones I had just been examining. Bronzed and blond, he was a walking advertisement for Sydney Beach, an image that extended to the two large surfboards that constituted all of his ship's cargo.

Except, of course, for the eleven kilograms of heroin that the customs service had discovered inside the surfboards without benefit of the airport's four-legged sniffer. Surfboards, innocent old Caneili had been amazed to learn, had become so common for smuggling dope that no one with any brains at all used them anymore. . . .

Now the Australian surfer languished in jail waiting to learn how many years of Tahitian hospitality his lack of imagination was going to cost him, and I was wandering distractedly through the lunch-hour throngs and wondering just how I could translate my gossamer-thin ideas into sturdy reality.

"I think I can get your money back for you," I said to Won Fat, "or whatever's left of it, but I'll need your help."

"Help?" His black eyes blinked at me uncertainly from behind their spectacles. "How . . . how do you mean?"

I considered my client dubiously. We were sitting in his tiny office deep in the bowels of the brewery with the sour smell of beer in my nostrils and an arcticlike gale chilling the back of my neck. Everyone in Tahiti, especially businessmen, over-air-conditions their office no matter what the cost of electricity may be. Right now, half-concealed behind towering stacks of invoices and printouts, with his pasty face and noticeably trembling hands, Won Fat didn't look capable of saying boo to a goose, as my maternal granny back in Bookbinder, Kansas, was wont to say, let alone giving me any help. "I need you to talk to Cousins again, maybe even twice. Spin him a bit of a tale, even." I tapped my wrist watch meaningfully. "And *soon.*"

"What . . . what kind of a tale?"

"A very easy one. I'll give you all the details."

"And it'll help me get my money back?"

"Yes."

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"I can do it." Won Fat's voice was surprisingly firm.

"Good." I leaned forward. "And I need another thing, too. Another million francs—in cash."

"In cash?" The client's mouth fell open in shocked dismay. "But—"

"Relax. I only need it as a prop. Remember how your brother Emile told you I was the only man on the island you could trust? It's still true. And I'll only need it for a couple of hours."

"When?"

"If all goes well, Friday afternoon or evening, just before our friend leaves for the airport."

Won Fat stared off into space. "I can get it," he said at last. "I have a cousin who gambles—I can borrow it from him."

"Good." I pulled myself even closer to the cluttered desk. "But first you're going to have to get Cousins off his boat for a little while. Take him to the pizzeria for a drink and a story—someplace where he can't see his boat."

"What kind of a story?" Won Fat's tongue ran nervously around his pale lips.

"Listen. . . ."

A few hours later I strolled past the shady waterfront restaurant elaborately renamed L'Api'Zerria since the last time I'd noticed and saw Won Fat and Robert L. Cousins huddled together over beer and Coke, deep in the darkest corner of an already somber establishment. I quickened my pace towards the center of town. I couldn't believe that our phony anthropologist would be walking away from the enticing proposition Won Fat was putting to him anytime soon, but if you're going to be doing something grossly illegal you might as well get it over with before you've had time to fully consider all the possible unpleasant consequences.

Marching briskly even for a legionnaire, I reached the bright lights of Papeete-by-night in record time. The sidewalk cafés of the Retro and Acajou's were jammed with early diners, and the sidewalks themselves were crowded with as diverse a collection of nationalities as you'd find outside the United Nations.

By this time, however, I had already crossed the tree-shaded waterfront boulevard and was in the comparative darkness of the sidewalk at which the yachties anchored their seagoing homes. Just ahead of me was the last boat in line—Robert L. Cousins's *Wayfarer*.

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Only now did it occur to me that there might be someone *else* aboard—such as a hitherto unremarked girlfriend. . . .

My step faltered for a moment, and then I pressed ahead. A legionnaire never gives up.

The *Wayfarer* was entirely dark. The hatch to the Aussie boat next door was open and a powerful cooking odor emanated from its innards, along with an equally powerful cacophony of incomprehensible strine.

I stepped onto the *Wayfarer* as if I had every right in the world to be there. A moment later I was bent over the padlock I had so sneeringly denigrated earlier in the day. All right, Caneili, I muttered to myself above the thumping of my heart, now let's see if any of those sly tricks you learned in the Legion make you as good as any of those street urchins over on the corner there. . . .

Thirty seconds later I was through the hatch and in the dank interior of the *Wayfarer*. No sleeping girlfriends attacked me in the darkness. Hours ticked by while I went about my business, but when I finally pushed the padlock back into place with noticeably sweaty hands and took a long, relieved jump to the sidewalk, I was astonished to see by my normally reliable watch that only ninety-three seconds had passed.

So much for the granitelike nerves of the intrepid legionnaire.

Just ahead, the blinking lights of an overpriced *bourbonnerie* flashed enticingly. Without conscious thought I pushed my way through the entrance.

Even legionnaires—just like camels—have to quench their well-justified thirsts from time to time. . . .

It was forty-five minutes later that the phone in my darkened office rang. It was Won Fat. "I did it!" he exulted in a voice that trembled with emotion. "I did it!"

"Was he interested?"

"He could hardly contain himself! It was all I could do to get away from him."

"And he'll meet you for lunch tomorrow or the next day?"

"Yes, right where you told me to take him."

"Great," I said with sudden weariness. "You've done a terrific job, Won Fat. Don't forget that I'll need the money Friday afternoon sometime."

"I'm getting it Friday morning."

"Great," I repeated. "See you tomorrow noon or the next day, I'll

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let you know which one." I hung up the phone and sighed with fatigue. It seemed like at least a week had gone by since Won Fat had poked his head into my office and yet it had only been ten hours.

And for old Caneili the day still wasn't done.

I reached for my dog-eared Rolodex. What, I wondered, was the unlisted home number of everybody's favorite fatty?

Alexandre Tama was fat, of course. But he was more than just fat—he was *big*. His massive head was almost large enough to go with the three hundred and fifty or four hundred pounds he hauled around and his mahogany-colored hands were the size of baseball gloves.

"Monsieur le Commissaire de Police!" I cried in a glad voice loud enough to instantly stop every conversation in the restaurant. I jumped to my feet and extended my hand.

"Joseph, *dit* Joe, Caneili," muttered Papeete's chief of police in soft French as he simultaneously scowled at me and mangled my hand. "What's the matter, you need a hearing aid in your old age?"

"Sorry," I murmured, subsiding into my seat. "It came out louder than I meant it to. Just glad to see you, I guess."

"Hrmph." Tahiti's most noted trencherman sank into the extra-large chair the indulgent proprietor of La Toscana kept expressly for his outsized guest. His piercing black eyes darted from me to the noontime chow-hounds that half filled the restaurant, to the beaming Italian owner and the Tahitian waitress who had appeared at our table as if by magic. This was *Monsieur le Commissaire's* favorite luncheon spot, and if all by yourself you eat enough for three or four normal people, even in Tahiti you're bound to get a little more service than the rest of us normal types.

"You're buying, Caneili?" demanded Tama in skeptical tones.

"Absolutely."

"Then I'll have whatever's good today," he told *le patron*. "And a little bit of rosé to go with it. And for *you*—" He turned his attention to the waitress, who was placing a large crock of butter on the table. *"—this!"* A long-stemmed red rose somehow materialized from behind her ear and was presented to the giggling Tahitian girl.

A startled snort from the table next to ours showed that not everyone in La Toscana was inured to the Commissaire's fondness for childish magic. I gazed coldly at the two men sitting to Tama's left. Robert L. Cousins was staring wide-eyed at the flower in the

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girl's hand, while Won Fat appeared to be studying the menu. For a moment Cousins's eyes met mine, then fell away. Turning back to my own menu, I heard furious whispering between Cousins and Won Fat.

"I'll have whatever *Monsieur le Commissaire's* having," I told the hovering waitress, "but only about a quarter as much." With another giggle she turned away and I darted a surreptitious glance at the other table. Won Fat was speaking softly to Robert L. Cousins, explaining to him, I hoped, that the additional one million francs he'd found to buy himself another ten percent of the takings from the Peabody Museum had definitely been raised but wouldn't be available in cash until tomorrow evening at the very earliest. . . .

"—dragged me here for?" demanded my giant economy-sized luncheon guest without looking up from the platter of *charcuterie,* sliced tomatoes, and white asparagus that had just been set before him. "I *know* you've got an ulterior motive—I just don't know which one."

"You're right," I admitted cheerfully, waving away the bottle of Côte de Provence rosé the proprietor was proffering and refilling my water glass. "I do have an ulterior motive." I placed three large but relatively thin books on the table.

"Hrmph, what's this? *A Child's Guide to Magic; Teach Yourself Magic; 100 Magic Tricks You Can Do Yourself."* His eyes bored into mine. "Three children's books on magic, Caneili? Are you perhaps trying to hint with your usual subtlety that I need to—"

"No, no," I interrupted hastily. "It's this French girl I'm trying to get to know a little better—she's *nuts* about magic. I thought I might make a little better time with her if I could learn some tricks to show her. So I bought these books but there're so *many* tricks! I thought if I asked the greatest expert on the island, you could . . ." My voice trailed off.

Tama scowled at me suspiciously for a long moment before turning his attention to the *tagliatelle alla bolognese* that had replaced the ravaged platter of *charcuterie.* "What's her name?"

I wagged a playful finger. "Oh no you don't! If I tell you her name, *you're* the one she'll be dating. I want you to *help* me, not steal her away."

The Commissaire snorted, but indulgently, and picked up one of the books with a gigantic paw. "Well, let's see. I think I saw the empty water glass in here, that's a simple one that always makes their eyes pop . . ."

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Some time later, after the braised loin of pork with roast potatoes and garden vegetables had disappeared as inexorably as all the rest, Tama sat back with a satisfied sigh. "No cheese or dessert today," he told the waitress, "I'm in a hurry. Just a double espresso." He stabbed the books with an enormous finger. "Satisfied?"

"You've given me a lot to think about—and practice."

"I hope she's worth it, Caneili."

"Oh, she is, she is." From the corner of my eye I saw Robert L. Cousins giving us the furtive once-over. "The vanishing Chinaman—could you do that with someone as big as that?" I jerked a thumb in the direction of the phony anthropologist.

Tama's head turned and his coal black eyes fell upon Robert L. Cousins speculatively. "No, he's a little too big," he said dismissively, "and anyway, that's far too advanced a trick for a beginner like you." He gulped his coffee and pushed himself to his feet. "Start with the empty water glass, Caneili, that's more your speed. Thanks for the lunch." His enormous bulk moved with the usual surprising gracefulness towards the door. "And tell me how it all comes out," he called over his shoulder.

"I will," I said, conscious of Robert L. Cousins's thoughtful gaze following the *Commissaire de Police.*

Even in summertime it's dark in Tahiti by seven o'clock, but this was the middle of winter and already dark—and a chilly seventy-eight degrees fahrenheit—when I jumped onto the stern of the *Wayfarer* at 6:12 the following evening. A few miles to the west of us Air New Zealand's flight from Los Angeles would soon be landing at Faaa International before continuing on to Auckland. The next few minutes would determine just what kind of memories of Tahiti Robert L. Cousins would be taking with him when he stepped aboard.

"Won Fat?" The so-called anthropologist looked up eagerly as I stepped down into the fetid atmosphere of the tiny cabin. He was sitting on a faded brown cushion behind a waist-high wooden bench that evidently served as the ship's dining room table. Three dully glowing lights in different parts of the cabin provided a faint orange illumination and deep black shadows.

"Won Fat isn't coming," I said in French in the thickest, most impenetrable imitation of a Marseilles accent I could manage.

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"What? What are you saying?" The eagerness on Robert L. Cousins's face was gradually turning to alarm.

"You don't speak French?" I demanded in the same throaty gargle.

"What? I don't understand!"

"Then we speak the English, yes?" Now it was my English that was so thickly accented you could spoon it over your steak instead of Béarnaise sauce.

"Ye—yes. Where's Won Fat?"

"I am come in his place."

"I don't understand. Why? Who *are* you?"

I stared down at him coldly while snapping open my tattered black briefcase. I was dressed in the whitest of my long-sleeved shirts and the darkest of my ankle-length pants. I'd even managed to locate a pair of shoes and socks in the farthest recesses of my closet. If I didn't look precisely like an advertisement for the Well-Dressed French Policeman, at least I didn't look much like Joe Caneili, retired legionnaire, either.

I pulled the thick packet of 5,000-franc notes that made up Won Fat's promised million francs from the briefcase and tossed it onto the table in front of Cousins. His eyes grew wide and he looked at me with even greater puzzlement. "What . . . what's that?"

"The million of franc he say he giving you."

The phony anthropologist's hand reached for the money and lifted it tentatively. I stepped forward and slapped it out of his hand. It fell to the floor and vanished into the gloom. "He not tell me give it you—I *take* it from Won Fat."

"You . . . *took* it?" Now I could see a growing fear in the little man's eyes. "I . . . I don't understand."

I managed what I hoped was a sinister chuckle. Retrieving the bills, I tucked them away in my briefcase. The briefcase I laid on the table in front of Robert L. Cousins. His eyes darted from it up to me, then back to the briefcase. "Leave it right there," I told him. "As you notice, I am much more bigger than you." With that I moved off and began searching his ship.

"Hey, what are you *doing?*" shouted Cousins indignantly. "You can't just—"

"Shut up," I snarled from the corner of the cabin that constituted the tiny galley. "I do what I want to do. You just sit there and shut up your mouth, *vous comprenez?*"

He must have understood, because he didn't say a word while

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I spilled his meager cooking supplies onto the floor and fumbled around in drawers and cupboards. "Ahh," I said a minute later as I poured cornflakes onto the filthy counter, then shook the box meaningfully. I held the box out to Cousins. "You like to look in the box? You tell me what big surprise you find in the box?"

A sick expression mingled with the fear in his face and he shook his head miserably. He must have guessed what was coming. I ripped the box apart and caught the neatly wrapped package of white powder before it could fall to the floor. "Just where Won Fat tell me it is," I said with a gloating leer. I leaned forward. "Now, what you think this is, Mr. Robert L. Cousins?" I thrust the package nearly into his face.

"I . . . I don't know."

"No? It look like one, two kilogram pure *cocaine* to me. Just what Won Fat tell me him bringing money for."

If anything, Robert L. Cousins's face grew even paler and sicker looking. "But . . . but . . ."

With my other hand I pulled my wallet from my pocket and flashed a photo-ID at him. *"Brigade des stupes,"* I muttered between my teeth before he could examine the ID.

"Bri . . . bri . . . ?"

"Drogue brigade," I snapped. "You see me and fat man at restaurant yesterday, yes? We watching you and Won Fat for ten day now. At lunch fat-belly Tama and I . . . how you say . . . ? turn coin to decide which one arrest you." I grinned cheerfully. "I win." Robert L. Cousins sank back in his cushions with a sick whimper and his head in his hands.

"What . . . what are you going to do?" he murmured, not even bothering to argue that the coke had obviously been planted. He must have come up against something like this sometime earlier and discovered the futility of trying to fight it.

"Give you seven year in French prison," I said, seating myself on the edge of his narrow table. "Unless . . ."

It took a moment for Cousins to get it. For a semi-pro con man he was really pretty slow on the uptake. "Unless?" he repeated finally, a tiny glimmer of hope glittering in his eyes.

"Unless you as smart as your friend Won Fat."

"How . . . how do you mean?"

"Won Fat give me one million franc not go to French prison. You much more richer—*you* give me ten million franc and you not go to French prison." I held out my hand imperiously. "Ten

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million franc—now. And after that . . ."

"After that?"

"You fly Air New Zealand in four hour like schedule and you never come back."

His shoulders collapsed. I knew about his reservation on Air New Zealand—there was no way to stall until he could escape on the plane. "I don't *have* ten million," he said piteously. "I don't have *anything.*"

"Actually," I said to Won Fat as I first counted over his two and a half million francs and then just as carefully removed two hundred and fifty thousand from the stack and tucked them away in the top drawer of my desk, "he had a little over five million hidden away in the money belt beneath his shirt. He must have worked the same swindle on someone else. Either that or it's his very unlucky day that he decided to carry his honestly earned savings around with him in French Pacific francs."

"Five million?" muttered Won Fat, his eyes on the drawer in which two hundred and fifty thousand francs now reposed. "And you're taking ten percent of mine?"

"You don't think ten percent is fair? You wouldn't learn anything from all this if it didn't cost you something, would you?"

He nodded faintly, clearly unconvinced. "And . . . and the other money?"

"Ah. It isn't ours, is it? What I want you to do, Won Fat, is to spread the word as discreetly as you can that if anyone recently had an unpleasant experience with a Harvard anthropologist he should see Joe Caneili for a private consultation. And I'll be doing the same."

That was precisely a year ago yesterday. No one came by to claim a share of the remaining francs and reveal how he had been gulled by Robert L. Cousins and a couple of scholarly books.

This morning I split the money into two equal portions and made two anonymous donations—one to the local ethnological museum, the other to a shelter the nuns are running for youthful drug addicts. I don't know what good the money will do either of them, but it probably won't hurt.

After that I turned back to today's newspaper and the full-color pictures of the twelve candidates in this weekend's election of Miss Hang Glider. ●

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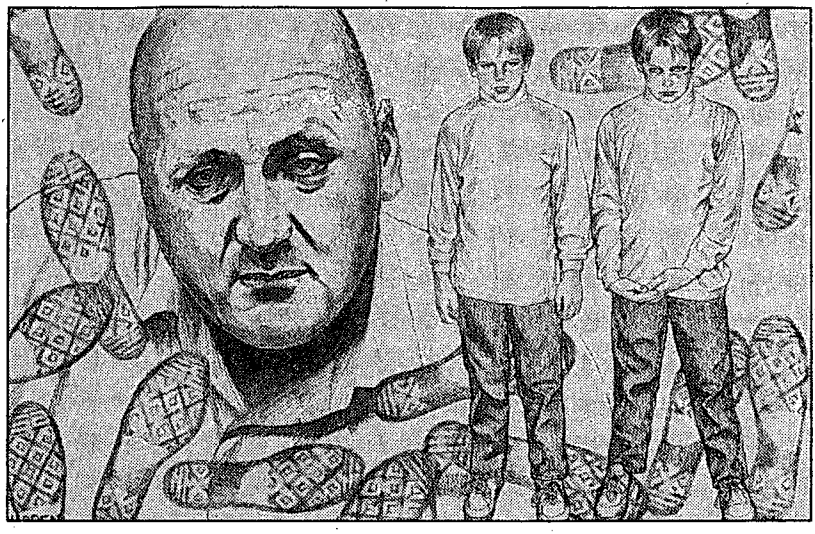

Art by Laurie Harden

LAST INNING

by Scott Mackay

Detective Barry Gilbert stared at the twins as the CSU moved the body of Brenda Fowler from the kitchen through the hall and out to the curved driveway. He couldn't rule the twins out: ten years old, the soles of their Reeboks covered with blood, their footprints all over the kitchen floor. And now he had a witness; Joe Lombardo had her out in the car right now, Ellen Cochrane, the next-door neighbor. Only where was the gun? Uniformed officers searched the house. He glanced out the big bay window, past the curly-headed boys, to where other officers searched the spacious front yard—a rich neighborhood, Forest Hill, where the doctors, dentists, and lawyers lived, an old neighborhood, one of the most prestigious in the city—and looked at the boys again. Angelic? Yes. Identical twins. He was going to have a hard time keeping them straight: Josh on the right, Cody on the left, both in royal blue turtlenecks, both in Levi's 501s, cute, couldn't be

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blue turtlenecks, both in Levi's 501s, cute, couldn't be killers. But then again . . .

He walked to the kitchen. A kitchen Regina would kill for, lots of room, an island, two ranges, off-white cabinetry, copper-bottomed pots hanging all over the place, a breakfast nook, a large mudroom leading to the backyard, sixteen-foot ceilings, floor of Belgian tile . . . only blood all over the tile now, tissue splattered on the off-white cabinetry, the photography unit still lighting the place with their flashbulbs, other detectives hunkered down taking measurements. Sometimes all the activity left him winded, like it was all for nothing, like they played the same game over and over again; there was never any end, never any meaning . . .

Since *EQMM* last published a Scott Mackay story, in 1997, the author has sold two new full-length books: *Outpost,* a science fiction novel (Tor/ March 1998); and *Cold Comfort* (Carroll & Graf/ Fall 1998) a mystery starring this story's sleuth, detective Barry Gilbert. †

He squatted by the double Pfeiffer sinks and looked at the perfectly delineated set of footprints, had to be a size ten, a person standing in front of the sink, only the left shoe looked like a brogue or loafer and the right shoe was definitely a jogging shoe, the tread badly worn, practically none left on the heel. Curious clue. Then the boys' prints, at the edge of the pool. Cautious prints. A single set each. Explainable prints. Not like the loafer and jogger prints. Someone else had been here, someone had stood at this sink, someone in a loafer and a jogger, and this other someone could have killed Brenda Fowler. Just the same, he couldn't exclude the twins, at least not yet.

"Barry?" Joe Lombardo called him from the front hall.

"I'm in here." He walked carefully to the hall, avoiding the blood.

Joe Lombardo stood there, immaculately groomed, hair tied in a ponytail, short but good-looking, a lipstick smear on the collar of his white shirt.

Barry touched the collar. "What's this? Your latest conquest?"

Joe Lombardo looked down at the collar, frowning. "I paid six bucks to have this shirt dry-cleaned."

"She wanted to mark you."

"Not funny." Joe glanced past his shoulder to the kitchen; he wasn't impressed; after a while, blood just wasn't impressive any-

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more. "Mrs. Cochrane says she's got a one o'clock hair appointment."

"I'm coming."

He found Ellen Cochrane standing next to their unmarked Lumina, looking as if she were about to leave, as if the murder of a perfectly innocent nanny, thirty-one years old, meant nothing to her. She had a widow's hump, wore lawn bowling shoes and a white cardigan, and had bifocals dangling from a chain around her neck. He glanced at the bifocals. Thick ones. Not a good sign.

"Good morning, Mrs. Cochrane."

The old woman peered up at him the same way a mole might peer at the sun, squinting, as if the sight of Detective Barry Gilbert hurt her eyes.

"I'm sorry to pull you away, Detective," she said.

She didn't try to hide her sarcasm, but Gilbert played it straight; he was too tired to play it any other way.

"That's quite all right," he said. "Perhaps you can tell me what you saw."

"I'd be glad to," she said, with the tones of a preacher about to blast all the unrighteous sinners of the world. "I saw one of those little boys shoot Brenda Fowler in cold blood. I was standing at my kitchen window." She waved vaguely at the gap between the houses. "I could see it plain as day. I couldn't believe it. Walked right up to her and shot her through the head. The little devil."

Gilbert peered over at the side of the house. Mrs. Cochrane's kitchen window did indeed face directly into the Swift's breakfast nook, giving her a clear view of the crime scene.

"Which one did it?" he asked.

She stared up at him, and her face settled, and she didn't look so sarcastic anymore, more like a dotty old woman who realized she had made a mistake. "I don't . . ." Her lips came together in an unpleasant pout. "You see, they look so much alike, I always get them . . . perhaps you can have the young man bring them out. If I have a look at them, I might be able to—"

"Joe," said Gilbert.

Lombardo disappeared into the house to fetch the boys.

"I hope you called the boys' father," said Ellen Cochrane.

"He's on his way." He watched the ambulance pull away. Dr. Blackstein would look at the body later, though there was little doubt about how Brenda Fowler had been killed. "Do you know the Swift family well?" he asked.

"I see the boys playing in the yard," she said. "With Brenda. But

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I don't think I've seen the father more than twice. He keeps odd hours."

Joe Lombardo returned with Josh and Cody, cherubic sprites, looking scared now, tears standing in Cody's eyes, Josh clutching his hands before him, staring at the intricate interlocking brick of the drive.

Ellen Cochrane peered at the boys, fretful, looking from one to the other.

"I can't tell," she finally said.

The boys looked up at her, solemn, silent, waiting to see what would happen. Interesting. A jury couldn't convict. Mrs. Cochrane could point to Cody, but could the jury really be sure it wasn't Josh? One of them did it, but reasonable doubt remained the same for both. Twins. Which to convict? Even with genetic evidence, their DNA was identical. Which to send away as a dangerous young offender? A major obstacle. A possible check on this case. But then there was always the loafer and the jogger.

Gilbert looked at Frank Swift's shoes first, expensive ones, Italian leather, understated, no frills, smooth, quality laces, the only conceit a burgundy sheen highlighting the essential chestnut. The twins were with one of the female officers in the rec room downstairs. Gilbert and Swift sat in the den, the house quiet, Lombardo wrapping it up outside, the murder now a few hours old, the negative electricity still floating in the air, like a ghost, thick around them, like there had been a magnetic disturbance, a blip on the radar screen, Brenda Fowler's death.

"I was picked up by a business associate shortly after nine-thirty," said Swift, sitting there bunched on the edge of the full-grain leather sofa, his eyes glassy, inward-looking, as if he were trying to solve Zeno's paradox.

"Mrs. Cochrane said as much."

Swift was a short man, with close-set blue eyes, a full head of black curly hair, and a high forehead.

"I'm sure she did," said Swift. Incredulous creases came to the corners of his eyes and he shifted, the leather squeaking beneath him. "You honestly don't believe her, do you? Josh and Cody loved Brenda."

"But your gun is missing. You keep it locked in a steel case upstairs. And now it's missing."

"As if ten-year-old boys have the sophistication to hide a murder weapon."

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The game. The endless skirmishing. And always the heightened suspicion, as if everybody was a potential murderer, even Josh, even Cody. He couldn't decide on Swift; Swift was many things at once: surprised, relieved, shocked, as if the details of the murder were at once familiar yet strange, as if he were running a movie in the back of his mind, going over the same scene again and again, trying to make sense of it.

"I'll have to take the name of your business associate," said Gilbert.

"Sure."

"Just for verification."

"Domenico Colella."

Swift gave him the address and telephone number.

"What kind of relationship did you have with Brenda?"

But Swift didn't hear, stared at the Japanese vase sitting on the floor in the corner, watching his movie, figuring out his next play, considering possibilities: containment, damage control, cover-up. Didn't hear his question so Gilbert repeated it.

"Brenda's been with us since the beginning," said Swift. "I've known her for ten years. I've always treated her well. She deserves it."

"She's attractive, isn't she? And you're a widower."

Swift's lips bunched. "Brenda's a happily married woman, Detective. It's never been that way with us. Even after my wife died."

Still running the movie, could see it in his eyes, but now concerned, about Brenda, about the boys, grasping the enormity of what had happened, how the consequences were going to affect his life.

"You sure it couldn't have been an accident?" Gilbert asked. "The boys somehow got into your gun case."

"How could they? It's solid metal. It's got two locks. I have the only key."

Concerned but cognizant, like he gazed into a crystal ball, divined cause and effect, pieced together circumstances Gilbert could only guess . . .

"I want to show you something," said Gilbert.

They got up and went to the kitchen.

He showed Swift the footprints, the loafer and the jogger; and now the movie stopped, Swift's brow knitted with mystification, and Gilbert wasn't so sure anymore; Swift looked lost, baffled, as if he had given up on Zeno's Paradox.

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Gilbert left the boys in the custody of their father over the weekend.

Monday morning, what did he have? As he sat in his office sipping a double cappuccino with one-percent, staring out the window at the congested sidewalks of Chinatown, he couldn't help thinking how next week was his birthday, June first, forty-eight years old, time to reflect, to consider what he had made of his life. Choices. Sometimes you had no control over them. He never meant to be a detective, wanted to be an architect, loved the look, shape, and feel of buildings. Loved Swift's house, an old Forest Hill monstrosity, with backstairs for servants, all covered with ivy, and a coach house out back. But now, like so many buildings and houses in this city, it had become a murder scene. So Gilbert no longer looked at buildings and houses the way an architect did.

He had the twins, in the rec room, watching *Ani-Maniacs,* when they heard a loud bang from upstairs. Too scared to go up right away. Josh creeps to the foot of the stairs and calls up. No answer. Finally both boys go up together. They find Brenda lying on the south side of the island with a bullet through her head. They accidentally step into the pool of blood. They don't call the police themselves. Mrs. Cochrane does. Before the boys get a chance to call, the radio cars are already there. At least that's what they say. But it takes the radio cars nearly twenty minutes from the time of Mrs. Cochrane's call, and that's what he didn't get. With twenty minutes there should have been a second independent call from the boys. They were ten years old. They knew how to call 911. But they hadn't. And he couldn't figure out why.

What else did he have? The loafer and the jogger, leading to the sink but never away from it. Odd. What happened? No retreating footsteps.

Like the jogger and loafer just disappeared.

He heard a knock on his partially open door, and turning, saw a man of about thirty-three, tall, sandy hair, trim moustache, wearing a black suit, black shoes and tie, recognized the man, but couldn't place him.

"Detective Gilbert?" said the man.

"Yes?"

"I'm Constable John Fowler. With 54 division?" Fowler gave Gilbert the chance to nod. "I'm Brenda Fowler's husband."

Gilbert's eyes narrowed; now he remembered, the annual baseball tournament last year, between 54 and 52 divisions; Fowler

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was a great pitcher, unbeatable, should have played pro.

"I'm sorry about your wife," said Gilbert.

The man's face tightened; he was barely holding himself together.

"Yeah . . . well." He stood in the doorway, looking lost, glanced down the hall, then down at his hands, long-fingered, with freckles. Tears crowded his lower lids and he wiped them away with a quick jerk of his sleeve. He lifted his chin into the air, getting control of himself, and his lips stiffened. "If there's anything I can do . . . anything at all . . . I've been talking to Lombardo."

How to explain to the man he was in no condition to help, that the best thing he could do was take a week off, maybe two, stay with family or friends, and let them get on with the case.

"I didn't know she was married to an officer," said Gilbert.

Didn't know, and now he was beginning to think it might have a bearing on the case.

Fowler's face broke with sorrowful mystification. "Why would anybody want to kill her, Detective?" Fowler glanced out the window, where the bustle of Chinatown went on undisturbed by his grief. "She went beyond sweet, she went beyond gentle; we were going to have a family next year, once we had enough for a down-payment on a house. She was good with kids."

Joe Lombardo came to Gilbert's office just as he was getting ready to visit Domenico Colella. The young detective looked tired this morning, smelled of Chanel No. 5.

"Why do you look at me like that?" asked Lombardo.

"Beds are made for sleeping, Joe. You smell like a cosmetics counter."

"Am I not allowed a personal life?" He dropped a mimeographed sheet on Gilbert's desk. "Did you not have a personal life before you met Regina?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you should give me a break."

"You love it."

"You're right," said Lombardo, "I do. As much of it as I can get."

Gilbert lifted the mimeographed sheet. "What's this?"

"Did you know Swift had a record?" Lombardo sat on the edge of the desk, his soccer-toned thighs bulging through his pleated dress pants. "Picked up for possession of cocaine eight years ago."

"How much?"

"Two ounces."

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"So he walked."

"A fine and probation."

"So you think there might be some connection?" said Gilbert. "I don't. What's two ounces? All these high rollers were shoving that stuff up their noses in the late eighties."

"I don't know," said Lombardo. "It got me checking, that's all. I had Blackstein go through some old files in the Coroner's Office. And he turned up Trudy Swift's autopsy. Cause of death, cocaine overdose. You see a pattern?

"More than just a lifestyle?"

"Maybe."

"But no proof," said Gilbert, sighing.

"I'd say the same, if it weren't for the terrible shape Swift's business is in. By rights, he should have gone bankrupt years ago. Import-export, bulk discount clothing, mainly, the kind of stuff you find in bargain stores."

"The kind of stuff you wouldn't be caught dead in," said Gilbert.

Lombardo gave him a wry shrug. "Can I help it if my dad's a tailor?"

"So you think he's shoring up his business by trafficking on the side," said Gilbert.

"Could be." Lombardo's beeper went; he glanced down at the number. "Then again, maybe he turned around when his wife died. I got to go."

Gilbert looked at the beeper. "When I was dating, all I had was a little black book."

Domenico Colella's office was down near the lakefront, not far from the Sunnyside bathing pavilion, in an economically depressed and prostitute-infested area known as the Track; not the most prestigious of addresses, grubby old buildings from the thirties, most of the storefront windows covered with years of grime, pigeons huddling in their own filth on second-floor sills.

Restaurant supplier. Sold a lot of espresso machines.

Gilbert climbed the stairs and went inside. Looked as if Colella didn't have much to do, but he made Gilbert wait anyway, out in the dust-choked reception area, with the snake plants growing thick with cobwebs, the secretary looking as if she would be more comfortable working the Track outside in high heels and a short skirt, not sitting in front of a ten-year-old computer.

Colella came out. Short man, bald, with just a fringe of hair, about fifty, brown suit with thick beige pinstripes, alligator shoes,

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little pin in his lapel of the Italian flag, green, red, and white. Gilbert showed Colella his identification and badge. Colella could care less.

"I got a full calendar, Detective, so let's make this quick."

They went into Colella's office. Furniture looked as if it came with the building, from the thirties, still with the patina of the Great Depression, dull browns and greens, chunks of the linoleum tile missing here and there, suffering from dense wax buildup.

Gilbert asked Colella about last Saturday morning.

"I got to the house at nine o'clock," said Colella. "I had breakfast there, toast, coffee, and orange juice, and Swift and me, we talked business. The kids were downstairs with their Pop Tarts, easy for Swift to fix them something like that."

"What kind of business?"

"Kitchen whites. Aprons. Hats. Pants. That kind of thing. Had this stuff real cheap from China. I thought it might be a good deal. He's had some good deals in the past."

"And what time did Brenda Fowler get there?"

"I don't know. About nine-thirty. We were in the front room having coffee. She let herself in the back door, we didn't hear her, so I can't pinpoint it any more than that."

"And what time did you leave?"

"Must have been a little after ten. We left in my car."

"And where did you go?"

Colella frowned. "To look at the whites. Down at his warehouse on Duncan."

"And Swift was with you the whole time?"

Colella leaned forward, looking even more annoyed. "Look, Detective. If you think Frank Swift had anything to do with Brenda Fowler's murder . . . I mean, why? The kids' nanny. Why would he do that?"

"You tell me."

Colella sat back, his ancient swivel chair creaking.

Outside, a streetcar rumbled past, the bell dinging, and six pigeons leapt into the air from the sill, like a joint suicide plunge.

"I'm his alibi, Detective. So why don't you stop wasting my time?"

Back in Chinatown, Joe Lombardo came to him with a sheet two volumes thick on Domenico Colella.

"He's been up on trafficking, laundering, counterfeiting, burglary, even murder. No one's made anything stick. He's currently under investigation for a bike-theft ring. Nothing definite yet."

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Lombardo took some photographs from the folder and slid them across Gilbert's desk. Grisly photographs. A murder scene, a mother, father, and two children gunned down: the mother, thirty or so, draped over the telephone table in the front hall, the children lying on the floor, the father crumpled on the stairs leading to the second floor, blood all over the place, like the inside of an abattoir.

"Colella did this?"

"We think he did. But we don't have any hard evidence. Not enough to prosecute."

Gilbert stared at the photographs. Read the description.

Gangland stuff. Just like the Brenda Fowler murder. But Colella was nowhere near the murder scene at the time of Brenda's killing. Or was he? Swift's silent film, running darkly behind his eyes, distracting him, terrifying him, like he knew something. Yet what about the footprints? A jogger and a loafer, not alligator shoes.

"Did you know Brenda's husband was on the force?" he asked. "John Fowler. I met him last year at the annual baseball tournament. Great pitcher."

"I know the guy," said Lombardo.

"You do?"

"I didn't know he was married to Brenda, though."

"Did you ever see him throw?" asked Gilbert.

"Oh, sure," said Lombardo. "Ten years ago he almost made the Jays."

"I didn't know," said Gilbert.

"On his good days he's been clocked at eighty-six miles per hour. He was picked out of high school, went through the Dunedin Single A team, then on to the Double A Knoxville Team, but never managed to make it any further."

"Do you think there's a connection?" asked Gilbert. "The fact she was married to a cop."

"It's worth considering."

Gilbert's eyes again strayed over the photographs of the slain family. This was what he hated, the game, the endless cycle: Everybody knew Colella did it but nobody could prove it—Colella gloating, laughing in their faces, sitting there with a smoking gun that no one could see, least of all a jury. Wiped out a whole family. Wiped out Fowler's family before he could start it. Brenda dead on the kitchen floor. Their only witness, a half-blind woman who thought it had to be one of the twins.

How was he going to shake this one loose?

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"Did you check on Ellen Cochrane?"

Lombardo shrugged. "I called the MTO. She had her driver's license revoked last year." He gathered up the photographs and put them back in the manila folder. "She didn't pass the vision test."

Dead ends. Games. And Swift with that movie running constantly behind his eyes.

June first. His birthday. He didn't know what Regina had planned, but he hoped it would be something that would make him forget all this. He sat on the back patio of the house in Forest Hill, one o'clock in the afternoon, Swift sitting across from him, sipping a wine cooler, nibbling tortilla chips, a workday, the kids at school, but Swift looking as if he didn't have anywhere to go. Shake it loose. Play the game.

"She's blind as a bat," said Swift.

"Yes, but we have other evidence, Frank. We found gunpowder residue on Josh's hands."

"That's impossible."

"I've got the test results right here, if you want to see them," said Gilbert, lifting his briefcase. "And you want to know what else we found? We found cocaine residue in fifteen different locations throughout your house. I'd hate to see you run into trouble that way again. I think there'd be more to it than a fine and probation this time."

"I don't get this. Why do you come to me again? I told you everything I know."

From the end of the yard, a squirrel appeared from behind an oak tree and drank from the swimming pool.

"And Mrs. Cochrane isn't our only witness, Frank."

Swift stared at him, then looked away, taking off his Juarnet sunglasses. "You've got a new witness?"

"That's right."

"And this new witness says Josh did it?"

Gilbert nodded. He was getting somewhere. Swift looked nervous now, his nostrils flaring, as if he were scenting out an enemy, his legs flexing, a small battle playing out across his face, intricate facial muscles at war with one another.

"I don't believe you," Swift said at last.

"I showed you those footprints." Shake it loose. "Someone was there." Play the game. "Someone saw the whole thing."

Forty-eight. Time to think about his life. But he couldn't get away from the game. When he had to fight dirty . . .

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"I don't believe it," said Swift.

"I don't believe it, either," said Gilbert, "but until I come up with a better theory, I'm going to have to take Josh into custody. Not very nice for a ten-year-old boy. Especially now, when he won't be able to finish the school year."

"Look, I know Josh didn't do it." He sat forward in the white wicker chair, his forehead creasing with anguish, his face turning red. The squirrel drinking from the pool darted away into the fern garden. "Is there any way we can talk about . . . I don't know, immunity or something?"

"Immunity?" Gilbert's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Look, this is very delicate. I could get in serious . . . Brenda got here early on Saturday. It's been very hard for us ever since Trudy died. I've suffered some financial reversals and I . . . It's been hard. And I've had to do some things I . . . just to stay afloat."

Swift turned his head in a sudden nervous movement; the amorphous reflections of the pool danced in his face, same pattern over and over, made by the way the filter jets disturbed the surface.

"So Brenda got here early," prodded Gilbert.

He saw the film rolling behind Swift's eyes.

Swift lifted his head and looked at Gilbert. "She saw something she shouldn't have seen. We didn't hear her coming, she came in the back door, she's so soft on her feet, and I wasn't expecting her till ten. Before we knew it she was in the hallway staring at us. She saw a suitcase full of money and a suitcase full of product."

Gilbert contemplated Swift. "Product," he repeated. "Is that what you call it?"

"Sometimes you deal with people you'd sooner not deal with."

"Colella's going to kill you for this, isn't he?"

Swift's eyes grew pensive. And Gilbert had to give the man at least a little credit: willing to risk his life with a monster like Colella in order to spare Josh the trauma of arrest. But that didn't explain the loafer and the jogger. Or Swift's missing gun. Slow down, Gilbert. One thing at a time.

"So then what happened?" asked Gilbert.

"We drove down to look at kitchen whites."

"So that part of it was true."

"And while we drove, Colella asked me all sorts of questions about Brenda. Was she cool? Could we trust her? I just wanted to appease him. I was talking a mile a minute. Both of us had tested some of the product. We were high. And I guess I let slip she was

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married to a cop." He leaned back in the chair, as if he were winded. He put his hand in front of his mouth and shook his head, incredulous at the enormity of his mistake. "He got quiet after that. Didn't say a word."

Gilbert felt as if he were sliding on ice, as if the firm ground, the direction of a moment ago, was gone, that his missile was off course.

"And then what?" he said, in tones of growing exasperation.

"We went our separate ways."

"So you didn't see him shoot Brenda?" he asked, unable to hide his disappointment.

"No." Swift looked angry at the suggestion. "I was at work."

"But you think Colella killed her. You think Colella came back here and shot her."

Swift looked at him; his meaning was clear. "Colella's old school. If he sees a problem, he eliminates it."

Gilbert's face settled. "Eliminate," he said, his voice dead. "Is that what you call it?"

He found John Fowler waiting for him back at his office.

Fowler looked paler, thinner, as if he hadn't slept in days, his face expressionless as he asked Gilbert if there'd been any progress on the case. He liked to protect the confidentiality of the case, but in this circumstance he felt he had to make an exception. Fowler was in the club. Fowler was one of them.

Fowler was a cop.

"You look at Colella's record," said Gilbert, "you meet him face-to-face, and you get a feeling about him, like he wouldn't think twice about gunning down those two kids and their mother and father. He doesn't see human beings as human beings. He sees them either as stepping stones or as obstacles. And he takes a long view. He considers all possibilities. That's why he's never caught. He stops trouble before it gets started. I'm convinced he killed your wife."

"But you have no definite proof."

Gilbert stared at Fowler, wishing he could tell him otherwise; a man like Colella had no place on the streets.

"I can't touch him."

"But you think he did it."

"There's lots of circumstantial evidence that says he did."

Fowler's eyes went glassy as he stared at the pewter walrus on Gilbert's desk, souvenir from last year's Alaskan cruise. The young officer then took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds,

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sat up straight, on the edge of the seat, and exhaled.

"Do you think you can nail him?"

Voice now riding the edge, like he was going to put his fist through a wall.

"I don't know." Gilbert thought of the loafer and the jogger. "There's a few angles we still haven't worked out."

Fowler nodded, a picture of disappointment. "You sound doubtful," he said.

Gilbert felt himself squinting, what he did whenever he was confronted with a particularly sad part of the game. Finally, he put his hands flat on his desk blotter. "I just don't know, John. We'll have to see what happens."

He sat in front of his birthday cake at home, two big candles, one in the shape of a four, the other in the shape of an eight, stuck on a sea of chocolate icing. Regina and his daughters, Jennifer and Nina, sang a discordant "Happy Birthday."

And all he could think about was Fowler. How he had somehow failed Fowler. How maybe he wasn't cut out for this business after all. Regina had a rack full of mysteries upstairs, and every one of them seemed so tidy. Nothing was ever so neat in real life.

Later on, a little past eleven, when he was making love with Regina, the blood came back to haunt him, size six Reeboks, the twins stepping in the edge of the pool, indecisive prints, as if they were so shocked they didn't know what to do. And their story: They were scared, by the time they decided to call the police the sirens were already coming down the street. Yet what about the other prints, the loafer and the jogger. If only he could figure that out.

Like a game. Sometimes you got beat. Sometimes you won. But for every inning played you always lost a bit of yourself, kept yourself going with the thought that somewhere, somehow, you might make a difference to someone.

At half past midnight the telephone rang. It was Joe Lombardo.

"I just thought you'd like to know," said Lombardo. "Domenico Colella has been murdered. In the parking lot behind his building. Bannatyne says he'll hold things for you, if you want to look."

"How do you know all this?" asked Gilbert, impressed by his young partner.

"Keeping track of dates isn't the only thing I use my beeper for, smart-ass."

Down in Parkdale, Lake Ontario stunk, the way it sometimes reeked on a warm night in late spring, thick with algae, like an

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aquarium with dead fish allowed to ferment.

At the crime scene, two cruisers with lights flashing blocked the alleyway leading to the small parking lot, and Gilbert had to walk in, showing his ID to the uniformed officer to get by.

Yellow police tape now blocked off the parking lot. Colella lay on his face, wearing the same brown suit of the other day, his feet now pigeon-toed, arms at his sides, hands cupped, palms upward, no blood, at least none that Gilbert could see.

Colella's car, a late-model purple Crown Victoria with gold mags, sat parked near the end of the lot. Bannatyne stood talking with some of his officers by a large garbage bin, a flashlight in his hand: Bannatyne, a man about his age, but large, with a wide ruddy face, big gut, thick arms and legs, not wiry like Gilbert.

"Bob!" he called.

Bob Bannatyne looked over. He said a few words to his officers, then joined Gilbert. "Joe said you were questioning Colella in connection with the Fowler murder. I didn't know you had a new one. I've been so busy I haven't kept on top of things."

"Has the coroner been by?"

"Not yet." Bannatyne took Gilbert by the elbow. "Come here. I want to show you something."

Bannatyne led him to a cube van, badly rusted, splotched with brown primer; it looked a bit like a Jersey cow, same kind of markings with that primer. The big detective got on his knees and shone the flashlight under the chassis.

"Take a look at this."

Gilbert got on his knees and looked under the truck.

He saw a baseball, regulation hardball, sitting there, one half of it covered with blood and a little bit of hair, strands undoubtedly from Colella's head.

"What do you think of that?" asked Bannatyne, getting up, a smile of amazement on his face. "I mean, I've seen a lot of weird murder weapons, but I think this takes it."

Gilbert got to Chinatown shortly after two in the morning, went upstairs to his office. Brooding. Because he shouldn't have told John Fowler about the Colella connection. He went to his desk and turned on his computer. He was tired. He just wanted to go home, there was no place more depressing than division headquarters at two o'clock in the morning. While his computer got itself going, he dug out the hard copy from his file. The game played itself out, always taking unexpected turns, and whether

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justice was served no one could be sure. He opened the Fowler file and started skimming through.

Couldn't be one hundred percent certain that Colella killed her, but now it didn't matter. He picked out any and all reference to Colella as a murder suspect. All that remained was Colella's verification of Swift's alibi. He stroked out any and all cross-references to the other Colella murders. Finally, he crossed out the two mentions of John Fowler.

He then logged on and made the computer edits, deleting all the backup files. Why did Fowler leave the baseball there? He wasn't stupid. Maybe he didn't have time. Maybe it rolled under the truck, maybe a car came along and he had to get out of there.

Wouldn't be any prints. Fowler was a cop. Delete, delete, delete. When Bannatyne came sniffing, he wouldn't find much.

He printed a new copy and shredded the old. And he stopped.

Because he knew he was breaking the law, that he was making himself an accomplice, that he was obstructing justice, that maybe, just maybe, Fowler felled an innocent man with his best fastball. Gilbert felt torn. Sometimes you had to make up the rules of the game as you went along. If only there were some way he could be certain Colella was Brenda Fowler's killer.

Cody Swift came to his office the next day, ten-year-old boy, all alone, should be in school, looking nervous but determined.

"Cody," said Gilbert. Could be Josh, but it turned out to be Cody. Gilbert braced himself; it looked as if the boy had important news.

"About the footprints, sir," he said. "The two big ones by the sink. They belong to a friend of mine. I thought I'd better tell you." Cody's eyes became earnest and wide. "He was there. But he didn't do it. He said we shouldn't say anything . . . I mean . . . even though he didn't do it. Because he thought if we did he might get into trouble. But I think you need to know, don't you, sir?"

Gilbert lifted a pencil, tore notepaper from his pad, and contemplated the boy.

"And who might this friend be?" he asked.

Cody looked down at his hands, his face coloring.

"His name is Norman," said Cody. "And he lives in the park."

Norman did indeed live in the park, one of the city's growing number of homeless, in the heavily wooded ravine section, where he had made a kind of temporary hutch out of old pieces of cardboard and scavenged plywood. One look at him and Gilbert knew he was

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one of the mentally challenged. He wore a green winter parka, black track pants, a jogger on the right foot, a loafer on the left. He cowered as Gilbert and Cody approached through the dense underbrush, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. He looked about forty-five; his hair was a mess and his face was deeply tanned, pleasantly weathered.

"You don't have to worry, Norman," said Cody. "This is Detective Gilbert. He's a friend of mine. He wants to ask you why you took my father's gun."

From his sitting position next to the door of his hutch, Norman peered at Gilbert.

"Do you have the gun anywhere hereabouts?" asked Gilbert.

Norman gave him a shrug. "It's inside."

"Why did you take it?"

Norman turned his head nervously, a jerky, sudden movement, as if he'd been bitten by a gnat.

"Because I know the way you cops work," he said. "Don't think I don't. I go down to Sears and I watch the shows on the TVs there. I know exactly how you work."

"And how's that, Norman?"

"First you find the murder weapon."

"Is Mr. Swift's gun the murder weapon?"

"Josh showed me it before."

"And you used it to kill Josh's nanny?"

Norman's eyes lit up with horror. "No, no, no," he said. "The man killed Brenda. Why would I kill Brenda? Brenda's really nice to me. If I go to the back door, sometimes she'll give me food."

"So you went to the back door Saturday to get some food."

Norman nodded furtively.

"And you saw the man shoot Brenda through the back of the head."

Another furtive nod.

"What did the man look like?"

"I had to do something. I knew you cops would blame Josh and Cody, 'specially because the man took off so fast in his big car."

"You saw the car?"

"So I went inside. And I realized I was walking through blood. And I know how Mr. Swift doesn't like Josh and Cody to track dirt all over the house. So I went to the sink, got up on the counter and washed my shoes off. Then I crawled along the counter so I wouldn't get my feet in any more blood."

Faulty reasoning aside, Gilbert believed Norman's story; the

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man was an innocent, incapable of lying. Went upstairs and got the gun. Trying to protect Josh and Cody.

"Can you tell me what the man looked like?"

"He didn't have no hair on his head. I saw him shoot Brenda. I was looking through the window. Then I hid behind the bushes when he left."

"Was he tall, short, fat?"

"He was short."

Short, like Colella.

"Did you see the car?" Gilbert asked.

Norman nodded gravely. "A big purple car with gold tires."

Colella's car, the Crown Victoria with the gold mags.

Game over. Never tidy. Still loose ends. He stood at his office window looking down at Chinatown, where the bustle went on as usual, a double espresso warming his hands, no longer feeling so bad about Colella. What to do about Frank Swift? Swift loved his children, Gilbert could see that in the man's eyes; but Swift's judgment was fundamentally bad, and he might in the long run hurt Josh and Cody. He would have to think about it. Then there was John Fowler. Just forget about John. . . . If Bannatyne nailed him, that was that. But so far, Bannatyne hadn't asked for the case file. Bannatyne was overloaded with a hundred other cases. Just like they all were.

He took a sip of his espresso, relishing the thick bitter liquid as it slid down his throat. A win, a loss, or a draw? He pondered the question as the sun buttered the street below. This one felt like a win. And so there was no point in adding Norman's name to the case file. Add Norman's name, and it might steer Bannatyne toward Fowler. And that would be a shame.

Because justice was done. Colella would never destroy another family, born or unborn. Norman wouldn't have been a credible witness anyway. Colella could afford top-notch help; Norman would have been destroyed on the witness stand.

So that was that. He smiled. He kept himself going by thinking that somehow, somewhere, he made a difference to someone. Maybe to an unborn family. Lights out. The crowds had left the stands. And it felt like a win. Just had to keep it that way. He took the case file from his desk and wedged it between a hundred others on the shelf. Still an open case, at least in the official record. But there it would sit, untouched, closed as far as Gilbert was concerned . . . buried in the dust of the game. ●

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The Man Who Collected Ravens

by Edward D. Hoch

An Edward D. Hoch story is usually a fully clued miniature novel; this time he departs from the norm to create, in five short pages, a mystery with a very unusual motive for murder. "The Man Who Collected Ravens" can also be found in the U.K. in an anthology entitled *Whydunit*, edited by Martin Edwards (Fall 1997). †

The series of crimes that would become known as the Raven Robberies began simply enough with the theft of one of the big black birds from a large pet shop in a suburban mall. The case was assigned to Sergeant John Corvo, as were most robberies in that area, and because he investigated the first one, the crimes which followed were his as well.

When he returned home that night Susan was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

"How did it go today?" she asked. It was her standard question, still asked nightly after three years of marriage. At times he wondered if she really cared about his answer.

Corvo told her of the stolen raven. "Naturally the lieutenant thought it would be the perfect case for me." He glanced through the microwave window to see what she was cooking. "Funny thing, though. The thief must have spent an hour bypassing the alarm and breaking into the place through a rear delivery door, all for one bird that sells for under fifty dollars."

The microwave chimed and Susan opened the door to remove their dinner. "Who else is on the case? Ruggles? Sloane?"

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"Sloane. He's young but he's sharp. I tell him he thinks like a criminal."

She laughed and opened a bottle of inexpensive red wine. "I'll keep my door open for any ravens flying around the neighborhood. You and Dave Sloane might need some help on this one."

"How are things at the brewery?" he asked, deciding to change the subject.

She whacked him gently on the thigh. "I keep telling you it's a restaurant, not a brewery. All those brands of beer are just part of the image. He doesn't brew it himself. Besides, I just do his bookkeeping."

He liked to kid her about her job, but in truth it was the perfect place for her. It took only a few hours a day, except at month's end and at tax time. And if they ever decided to start a family she could still continue working there.

Dinner was a delight and the wine was good. By bedtime Corvo had forgotten all about the stolen raven.

The raven folder sat on his desk for a few days and then vanished into the file basket. No leads had developed and no follow-up was necessary. It wasn't exactly the Bank of America.

One week after the pet-store robbery, a video store in the same mall was broken into, again through the rear service door. When Corvo and Sloane arrived on the scene, it took only a brief examination of the door to realize it was the same thief. "Is anything missing?" Corvo asked the store manager.

"With thousands of videos in stock it's hard to know for sure. There's only one obvious thing. I found that empty cassette sleeve on the floor, just where you see it."

Detective Sloane squatted down to examine it. "An old Alan Ladd movie, *This Gun for Hire.* That must be over fifty years old!"

Corvo walked over to look at it. "Have it checked for prints."

"Why would he steal the cassette and not the box?" Sloane wondered.

"He wanted us to know what he'd taken." Corvo glanced at the manager. "Do you have another of these in stock?"

"I think so," the young man said, hurrying off to find it.

There was a VCR with a monitor in the front of the store and they played the beginning of the tape. It took them only a few moments to establish that Alan Ladd's name in the film had been Raven.

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"You knew that, didn't you?" Detective Sloane asked.

"I thought I remembered it. And the job on that back door was identical to the first robbery at the pet shop."

"Looks like we've got ourselves a thief who collects ravens."

"Yeah," John Corvo said. The idea made him unhappy.

The second robbery was enough to interest the press, and when the story appeared under the headline "The Raven Robberies" it brought a phone call from a woman who lived a few blocks from the shopping mall. She'd spotted a large black bird in a nearby tree. She thought it was a crow, but perhaps it was the stolen raven. Corvo drove out to see about it.

"Detective Sergeant John Corvo," he told the woman, showing his badge. "Are you Amber Knox?"

"That's right. You came about the bird?" She was a young mother with a couple of preschoolers at her heels. "He's back there someplace. I saw him again about an hour ago."

She led the way into the backyard, pointing toward a tall old oak. They watched for a few minutes before a black bird with a wide wingspan took off in flight from the upper branches. It looked like a big crow to Corvo, but he guessed that was what ravens were. "Not much chance of catching it," he decided. "But I'll tell the pet-shop manager it's in this area. Maybe they can come by with a net."

That night at home he told his wife about it. "The lieutenant thinks it's a big joke, having me out all day chasing after a stolen raven."

"What about this video cassette?"

"Another raven. The character's name was Raven."

Susan Corvo shook her head. "The whole thing is strange. It's almost as if—"

"Don't say it."

In the morning he thought about requesting an extra patrol car for the mall parking lot, checking the back doors at night. He went in and talked to Lieutenant Barnes about it. "There's going to be another one, Lieutenant. He's not done yet."

"Come on, Corvo! We can't spare a nighttime patrol for something like this. What's he stolen so far? A fifty-dollar bird and a twenty-dollar videotape."

"Ten dollars. It was on sale."

"It's petty larceny, for God's sake!"

"I think there'll be more," Corvo said.

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Lieutenant Barnes sighed. "I'll tell the regular patrol to keep an eye out. More than that, it's up to the mall's own security people."

That night around eleven o'clock Corvo told his wife he was going out for a brief drive. He went over to the mall and circled the place twice, looking for anything suspicious. Then he parked across the street for a half-hour, but no cars entered the lot. Finally he decided he was wasting his time and went home to bed.

It was four nights later that the next break-in occurred. As soon as Corvo heard that a bookstore in the mall had been hit, he knew what had been taken. "The poem by Poe. The one about the raven."

The lieutenant nodded. "They took *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe.* Other books were pulled off the shelf so the store manager would notice immediately what was missing."

Dave Sloane was on another assignment, so Corvo drove out to the mall alone. The manager of the bookstore, one of a large chain with locations in all the malls, didn't seem overly concerned. "The main expense is the damage to the door, and the mall takes care of that. It was a bargain edition selling for nine ninety-five."

"The book included the poem 'The Raven,' didn't it?"

"Sure, that's always in the Poe collections."

"Are any separate editions of it published?"

"Yes, from time to time, usually with illustrations to fill up the space. It only runs six pages in this edition."

"But you don't have any other editions?"

"Just *The Complete Tales and Poems.* This is our only compact edition of the poems."

Corvo made a couple of notes. "As you know, we suspect this is connected with two other recent mall robberies. Have you noticed anyone suspicious loitering around?"

"Not especially. We always get a few people who spend their days wandering around the mall, but they're usually harmless."

Corvo gave the manager his card. "Phone me if anything occurs to you."

He didn't return immediately to his car. Instead he walked the length of the mall and back again, pausing several times to enter stores and glance over the merchandise. He was looking for the next raven, and he couldn't find one. Finally, in a men's shop, he paused before a full-length mirror and stood staring at his own reflection for a long time. Then he walked slowly back to his car.

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Later, back at the squad room, he told Sloane, "The thief will strike again at the mall. Only this time we'll be waiting for him."

"You know what the next target will be?"

"Yes," John Corvo said. "The target will be me. My name means raven in Italian."

"What?"

"That's why the lieutenant joked that I was the perfect one for this case."

Dave Sloane let out his breath. "When will it be?"

"The first night that I go back there alone. I want you for my backup. We'll take him."

"When?" Sloane asked again.

"Tomorrow night."

Later that night, at home, after the mall had closed at ten o'clock, Corvo told his wife, "I have to go out for a while. I hope I won't be long."

"Are you going over to that mall again?"

"It's something I have to do."

"John—"

"Goodbye."

The night was starless as he pulled into the parking lot, deserted except for the car of a security guard he'd never yet encountered. He circled the outside of the sprawling mall once, checking the back doors like a cop on the beat. When he'd completed the circuit he returned briefly to his car. Then, after a few minutes, he set off again, retracing his route.

This time he was halfway around the building when a voice from the shadows called his name. "John," it said softly.

Recognizing the voice, he started to turn. "How did you know I—?"

Dave Sloane shot him once in the head.

A few weeks after the funeral, when a proper amount of time had passed, Dave Sloane drove out to Susan Corvo's house, where the last of his ravens was waiting for him. ●

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Do or Die

by Barbara Owens

In the twenty years since Barbara Owens debuted in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories with the Edgar-winning "The Cloud Beneath the Eaves," she has expanded her range to include science fiction and fantasy as well as mystery. She joins us here with a cop story in which her appealing sleuth Hank Skovich takes the lead.

The rain skittering across the windshield was cold, just above freezing. Black puddles in the streets threw off reflected headlight flares. Detective Hank Skovich hunched over the steering wheel, replaying the phone conversation in his mind and trying to ignore the fact that he hurt all over. His head felt like a basketball and his gut was doing calisthenics again. It was late, almost midnight. A lousy night to be out.

The 600 block of Webster was closed off. Pulsing strip lights atop the sprawl of squad cars midway down the block lit up the darkness with an eerie, festive air. The cop at the barricade checked his ID, pointed out the captain, and waved him through. Several lighted windows in houses up and down the street, no one outside. Captain Hannon trotted to meet him, sliding into the passenger seat. He was wearing a slicker but his face streamed water, dripping off his prominent nose.

"Don't like to do this to you, Hank," he began abruptly, "but we've got a mean situation here. Beloit won't talk to anyone else and he's holed up in there like a bat in a cave. Are you up to this? It's your call."

Skovich studied the target house through the windshield. A faint light showed in one of its downstairs windows. "You sure Terry's in there?"

Hannon held up his cellular phone. "I talked to him myself."

"Then I'm up to it."

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"I didn't get much out of him before Beloit shut him off, but he says he's okay. The hostage guy is here but Beloit won't budge. Only you." The captain shot him a look. "You a particular friend of Lou's?"

"Just knew him when he was on the force."

"Any idea why he'll talk only to you?"

"Not a one."

Hannon nodded. "Okay, here's how it stands. Just after Beloit called us we got word that a neighbor of Beloit's ex-wife found her in her apartment. Beaten up pretty bad but she'll make it, and she says Lou did it. Now how he got Terry Hacker and where he fits in, we don't know. But that's Beloit's house and they're in the basement. No damn windows. The place has been cut into apartments, but everybody's out of there and we cleared the adjacent area. Beloit told me how he wants you to come in, how to find him." He smacked his thigh in frustration. "I don't like it. Too dangerous. But if you can just stall him until we figure out a way to get at him, get gas in, cut the power—"

"Don't forget that's my partner in there," Skovich cut in sharply.

"I know it. The shooters are here and ready, but I don't want to use them unless all else fails."

"Yeah, that's good. Don't let them loose until you're sure something's happened to me."

"Well, get in contact with me as soon as you can. Try to give me an idea of the situation. Beloit's already promised us Hacker's a dead man if we don't do things his way."

Skovich shook his head. "Captain, I don't know how good I'll be at hostage negotiation."

"Don't worry about that. You just keep him calm and talking. See if he'll talk to me or the hostage guy. We'll back up anything you tell him, understand? Try to keep him cool until we can figure out what to do."

"What if I get a chance to take him?"

"Look, this already goes against procedure. We both know the risks you're taking," Hannon answered coldly. "All I care about is you and Hacker coming out of this alive."

"Well, that's kind of what I had in mind," Skovich said. "Let's do it."

Hannon punched the cellular, said, "Skovich is here," and handed over the phone.

Skovich felt a slow slide of ice in his belly. "Lou?" he said.

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"That really you, Hank?"

"It's me."

"Yeah, I recognize your voice. Come on in. But come slow. And don't bring any surprises with you."

"I'm alone and unarmed. Hang on. I'm on my way."

The captain gave his shoulder a squeeze. "This isn't right," he said heavily. "Not right at all. Talk him out of it if you can, Hank."

Then they were outside in the rain. Before Skovich reached the big old brick building's front walk, he was soaked. A chill gripped him and he stopped a minute to clear his head. Surrounded by officers, brothers, he was on his own. Slowly up the front steps and inside.

A weak light glowed in a room to his left. The rest of the house was dark. It smelled its age. One even step after another, he moved down a central hallway until he reached the door that Beloit said led to the basement. A deep breath and Skovich opened it. Feeble light from a hanging bulb at the bottom of the steps, then empty darkness stretched away. Damn, he thought, it's full, goes under the whole house. At the foot of the steps, a disembodied voice stopped him.

"I've got you in my sights, Hank. Take off your clothes and leave them on the bottom step." The voice sounded friendly and calm.

Skovich peered into the darkness. "My clothes? I told you I wasn't armed, Lou. You can search me if you want."

"Take 'em off, Hank." Beloit sounded amused. "I figure that gives me—what do you call it—a psychological advantage? Everything off but your underwear."

The frigid damp of the basement was already settling into his bones. Skovich shifted uncomfortably. "Listen, Lou, you got me out of bed. I've got one hell of a case of the flu. Ask Hacker—I've been off work three days. Can I keep my shoes and socks?"

"I hope you realize who's running things here," the pleasant voice said. "You don't want to make me mad."

"Okay, they're coming off." It wasn't until he was down to his shorts that Skovich realized he'd thrown his clothes on over the pair he slept in, a baggy pair of boxers his sister had given him as a joke, big red smiling heart faces on a sea of bilious blue. He clenched his jaw.

As he parted reluctant company with his final sock, the voice said, "Now keep coming toward the sound of my voice."

The cold cement against his bare feet set his teeth clacking. The

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basement was vast, crammed with shadowed shapes against its walls. The place reeked of mildew.

Keep him talking, Hannon said. "Nice place you got here," he said into the emptiness.

"It's old," the voice answered. "And not exactly the bright side of town."

He estimated he had moved twenty or thirty feet into the basement when he saw a slit of light under a door ahead and the shadow of someone standing in front of it.

"I can see you now, Lou."

"I can see you too, Hank. I'm going to open the door. Get down on your hands and knees and crawl in backwards."

"Sure, Lou, anything you say." *I'll kill him if I get the chance,* he thought with eager anticipation. Down to the floor, the cold popping goosebumps onto his bare skin. He backed slowly into a dimly lit room.

"Now sit down where you are and turn around slow."

Automatically, he looked first for the weapon. It was looking back at him from a distance of no more than twelve feet, a 9mm Beretta. He had looked down the barrel of a gun a few times in his past, but none had looked as serious as this one—with him helpless, almost naked, in the dark bowels of some damned basement.

Lou Beloit was smiling at him from above it, squat and beefy, same underslung jaw and gray crewcut, same flat eyes. "Good to see you again, Hank," he said.

"Yeah, me too," Skovich said. His eyes slid, seeking his partner.

The door through which he had just entered was in a corner of a narrow rectangular room. Terry Hacker, wearing a gray sweatshirt and jeans, was seated on the floor against the opposite outside wall. His hands were cuffed around a leg of a freestanding metal laundry tub, his legs bound with rope. He had been leaning his head against the tub's side, and when he raised it to look at his partner Skovich saw a deep ugly gash running from his hairline to his right cheekbone. The whole right side of his face was covered with blood, and it had run down his neck to saturate the shoulder and sleeve of his shirt. His right eye and temple looked swollen and blue.

"You okay, Terry?" Skovich asked calmly.

Hacker gave him a faint smile. "Got a little headache." His eyes looked slightly fogged. Then he added, "You know, it's hard to take a man seriously when he's wearing hearts on his shorts."

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Skovich tried to keep the rage out of his face and voice. "What's going on, Lou? Why Hacker, if all you wanted was me?"

Beloit kept smiling. "He wouldn't have gotten hurt if he hadn't tried to get tough. I told him all I needed him for was to make sure I got you here. See, I remember how you are with partners, Hank, do or die. But this one had to get cute." He waved the Beretta. "So I had to give him a little pat with this."

"How about letting him go then? I'm here. Let Hacker walk out."

Beloit's smile dimmed. "In your dreams. Don't treat me like I was dumb, Hank. I'm not dumb. He stays. Call him added insurance. Now reach out, close the door, and sit against it. Anyone tries to come through gets you first."

Skovich did as ordered, back against the door and knees pulled to his chest.

"That's good," Beloit said. "Now let's all get comfortable."

"Whatever you say, Lou. This is your show."

Skovich's eyes were busy, detailing the room. Maybe ten by fifteen feet, cement exterior walls on one short and one long wall, so they were in a corner. Interior walls flimsy, obviously a makeshift job when the house was converted into apartments. Two sturdy cement support posts stood equidistant down the center. On his own long wall were three old automatic washers. Two dryers and the laundry tub against the opposite wall. Cramped quarters. No heat. He searched in vain for anything that could be used as a weapon. Not much—two folding metal chairs, a rickety table along the short wall to his right. Slim pickings.

Another chill racked him, causing his legs to shake and his jaw to clench. He rode it out while Beloit stood beside the far support post and watched him. Hacker's forehead was back against the tub's side.

"Terry?" Hacker's head jerked up. "Don't go to sleep. I don't care what you have to do to stay awake, but do it. You may have a concussion."

"Okay," Hacker said.

Skovich looked at Beloit. "Will you let me try to stop the bleeding?"

Beloit shrugged. "It's a bump. Heads bleed. He's okay."

"He got me in the parking garage of my building," Hacker volunteered suddenly. "Jumped me from behind. Brave guy."

Beloit's eyes darkened. He was sweating slightly, Skovich noted, maybe not so calm as he appeared. "I got as much guts

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as you. Look at you, a pretty boy."

"Not as pretty as I was." Hacker managed another thin grin. "What do you think, Hank? Are my looks ruined?"

"Never," Skovich said.

"Still as good as Redford?"

"Better than Redford on his finest day. Besides, you know how women go for scars." Hannon said keep Beloit talking. "Okay, Lou, I'm here. I'd better let Hannon know I made it."

Beloit unclipped the cellular phone from his belt and slid it across the floor. The Beretta stayed fastened on Skovich's face, unwavering. "Come and get it. Crawl."

Skovich crawled, every muscle in him wanting to take a run at the older man, come up off the floor and get him in the gut with his shoulder. But the Beretta would put him down before his knees were off the floor. He picked up the phone, punched in the numbers Beloit gave him, and was hit by a sudden spasm of coughing. It seemed to last forever, and when he could finally speak again he said weakly into the phone, "It's Skovich. I'm in."

"Can you tell me anything? The layout of the room?"

"Not yet."

"What's the weapon?"

"That's enough," Beloit said. "Put down the phone."

Skovich did, scooting back to his place against the door. "Well, what's the problem, Lou?"

He watched while Beloit retrieved the phone. "How's old Mahoney? You and him were partners for a long while. I hear he retired a few years back."

"Yeah, he was still in Arizona the last I heard from him," Skovich said carefully.

"Mahoney and you were a couple of real square cops, weren't you? Golden boys. Never bent the rules." Beloit's smile was still in place, but a mean edge crept into his voice.

"Oh, I guess we did once in a while."

"Hey, pretty boy." Hacker's head lifted in response. "You know about me?"

Hacker squinted painfully. "All I know about you is you're a lousy host. You invite me to your place and I decline, so you hit me over the head, tie me up, and now I'm here and you don't even offer refreshments. I'd at least expect some cheese and crackers, maybe a beer."

Beloit stiffened. "Shut up, Terry," Skovich said quickly.

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Beloit cocked his head at Skovich. "I don't like him much. A real comedian. Might end up getting himself killed."

"You don't want to do that, Lou," Skovich said. He shot Hacker a warning look. "Whatever you want here today isn't going to happen if you have a dead cop on your hands. Don't pay any attention to him. I'm the one here to iron things out. You talk to me."

"Well, I want him to hear it," Beloit said. "It's a good story. He might learn what can happen to cops sometimes."

He turned his head toward Hacker. "I got muscled out of the force. After seventeen years they made me get out. I had this young wife, Gigi, hardly more than a girl, and Gigi liked pretty things. Lots of pretty things, more than a cop's salary could afford. Never shut up about it—get me this, why can't I have that, I want, I want. Drove me crazy. So I made a bad move. Fell in with some cops who were into a sweet little operation. Broke into stores and fenced the stuff they took. Good stuff, high ticket, electronics mostly. Fenced them, supplemented our income, you might say."

While Beloit's focus was on Hacker, Skovich's eyes raked the room. The metal chairs were out of the question. He could never get to Beloit before the Beretta got him. Washers, dryers, cement posts. Nothing.

"But we got caught," Beloit was saying. "Flat-out dirty. The other guys got sent up, but they didn't have enough evidence against me so I got off. Lucky, right?" The short bark of laughter snapped Skovich's attention back to him. Beloit was sweating harder, heat rising in his voice. "I didn't do time but they made me quit anyway. Said they knew I was dirty. A crooked cop. No more pretty things for Gigi. I go to work for my brother-in-law in his hardware store and Gigi runs off and marries her hairdresser. End of story. What do you think of that, pretty boy?"

Skovich eyed Hacker warily. "Some story," Hacker said. "Sorry I mouthed off. You got a dirty deal." Skovich sighed with relief. Terry had decided to play it smart.

Beloit turned back to Skovich. "It keeps eating at me, you know? What cop wants to spend the rest of his life in a hardware store? So I got a plan. Burn my bridges and get on with it. That's why I need you, Hank."

Here it came. Skovich shifted on the cold cement and strained to keep his head clear. "That's what I'm here for, Lou. What can I do?"

Beloit had not moved from his position beside the far post, but the effect his own story had on him had caused the nose of the Beretta

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to dip slightly, pointed somewhere towards Skovich's middle.

"I remember you as a stand-up guy, Hank. Sure, you're square, but people like you. You're the kind of guy everybody trusts and likes, men, women—" His gaze flickered back to Hacker. "You ever notice how women react to this man? Don't know what it is that these big 'aw shucks' guys have, but it works every time." When Hacker didn't answer, Beloit raised his voice. "You listening to me? You know what I mean?"

Hacker's head jerked up. "Yeah," he answered, his words slurred. "He's a real lady-killer, all right."

Beloit blinked rapidly and the Beretta dipped to aim at the hearts on Skovich's shorts. Skovich cringed.

"No," Beloit said finally. "I'm the lady-killer. I did Gigi, took her out today. She never should've done me that way." Sweat popping, his eyes drilled Skovich. "And you got to get me out of it, Hank. It's up to you. You're the only one can make them listen."

A blast of fever was replacing Skovich's chills. The inside of his head felt furry. Had to keep it together, had to. Carefully, he cleared his throat.

"That's where you're wrong, Lou. Captain Hannon told me before I came in that somebody found Gigi. She's pretty banged up, but she's not dead. So you're not a killer. Now why don't we all just walk out of here and—"

Beloit sagged. His gun arm dropped, the Beretta's nose pointing to the floor. Skovich fought the urge to take a rush at him. Never work, the distance was too great. His eyes swept the room again. Nothing. A crumpled white plastic bag lying on the floor beside the nearest washer. Whip it over his head and wait until he suffocated? Sure.

Beloit's head came up. He was smiling again and he had a new gleam in his eye. The Beretta rose to point at Skovich's head again.

"She's not dead? Then maybe I still got a chance. Hank, you've got to pull this off for me. I want my job back. Call Hannon. Tell him that's the one and only deal. I want another chance. Then we all walk out of here alive."

Skovich tried to keep his face expressionless. The man was gone. Lights out, nobody home. Another coughing fit hit him and he coughed until his ribs ached, his forehead on his propped knees. From the corner of his eye he could see the crumpled plastic bag again. Was there something in it, a hint of something

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solid? Slowly, he raised his head.

"I'll talk to him, Lou. But I don't know if it will work."

Beloit beamed. "Make it work."

"Okay. He might go for it. You know, he just might." The older man didn't move. "I'll need the phone, Lou."

Beloit's answer was two quick steps to Hacker's side. He slammed the Beretta against the side of Hacker's head so hard that his forehead bounced off the metal tub. Fresh blood began to seep down his neck. He didn't move.

Skovich was already in a squat, poised, when the Beretta fastened on him. Beloit's smile was ugly.

"I already told you I'm not dumb, Hank. Just wanted to see if I could trust you. And now I know. Hannon says sure, right? So I walk out of here like a little lamb and those guys out there are all over me. Okay, now we both know where we stand." He laid the phone on the floor and pointed. "You get on that phone and tell Hannon I want a clean car and a hundred thousand in cash, small bills. I want it here in one hour and I want a safe ride out of town. Pretty boy here will go with me, and when I figure I'm far enough away I'll put him out of the car. That's the only deal. Take care of it."

Skovich eyed his motionless partner. "You can't take him, Lou, he's hurt. Take me."

"I don't want you, I want him. No more kidding around. Do it or he dies."

"If he dies, you do. You know that."

"And you die, too. Doesn't matter to me."

Slowly, Skovich picked up the phone and relayed Beloit's demands to his captain.

Hannon swore. "Tell him we'll do it, of course. How are things in there?"

"Heavy," Skovich said carefully.

"He getting edgy?"

"That's right."

"Can you handle it?"

"I don't know about that."

The captain muttered something under his breath. "We're trying to get to you, Hank. Jesus, what a mess. Try to stay calm, okay? Stall's the operative word now."

"Thanks." Skovich placed the phone back on the floor. "Captain says you got it. May be hard to get that much money this time of

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night, but he says he'll find a way."

Beloit was sweating hard. His grin looked frozen. "He'd better."

From where Beloit stood by his post, the plastic bag was hidden from his sight by the washer. Hacker still hadn't moved. Time was running out.

"Lou, I'm really sick," Skovich said. "I'm trying not to pass out on you. Can I sit there by the washer while we wait? There's a bad draft coming in under that door." Beloit eyed him warily. "Look, I'm not going to be any good to you if I'm out cold." At that moment his body obligingly convulsed in another bout of coughing that left him bent over, gagging and gasping for air.

"Okay," Beloit said finally. "Sit. But sit quiet. Don't try anything cute."

"How could I?" He was chilling again. He edged gratefully down at the side of the washer, pushing back into the plastic bag. He met resistance; something solid was in there. His mind considered the possibilities. Soap powder—he could suds Beloit into submission. Hangers—hold still, Lou, while I slip this over your head and choke your rotten neck. Don't shoot me, okay? He fought the silly giggle rising in his throat. That brought on another coughing fit, and on the opposite wall Hacker stirred. Beloit glanced at him and Skovich shot a hand behind him, into the mouth of the bag. Smooth. Rounded. Plastic. Felt like a jug or bottle. Heavy, almost full. His fingers traced a cap and came away moist. When Beloit's gaze swung back to him, Skovich swiped a hand across his face and caught a faint whiff. Bleach. There was a bottle of it inside the plastic bag. Hurriedly, he began to assimilate his limited knowledge of bleach.

Beloit had been standing like a rock beside the cement post. He should be getting tired of holding the Beretta steady. Hacker stirred again, his head rolling against the side of the tub. When Beloit glanced at Hacker, Skovich reached behind his back and inched the bottle toward him, out of the confines of the bag. Beloit looked back and Skovich leaned heavily against the washer to mask his hidden arm. Keep him talking.

"This flu is giving me the shakes, Lou. I'm not too sure I'm going to make it." The bottle was out of the bag, close against his hip. He didn't know much about bleach, he concluded, except that you weren't supposed to get it in your eyes. Okay.

"I grew up in this house," Beloit said, ignoring his complaint. "Pile of junk. My old man was a master carpenter and he let his

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family live in a pile of junk." Hacker raised his head. The fresh blood on his shirt glistened richly in the dim light. "How about you, pretty boy? What's your father do?"

Hacker's gaze was dull. He muttered something unintelligible.

"What did you say?"

"He said pharmacist," Skovich said. "His dad's a pharmacist. You okay, Terry?"

His partner turned toward him. "Sure." For a moment he looked puzzled at Skovich's curled position against the washer, then Skovich saw him get it, saw understanding in his eyes. He laid his head back against the tub. "No, I'm not okay. I don't feel so good, Hank. I'm not—I don't—" The words thickened and trailed away.

"How about you, Hank?" Beloit said. "Your old man?"

The cap of the bottle was screwed on tight. Skovich shifted, pinning it to the washer with his hip, and worked carefully. Not a snap with one hand but he had to do it. "He's retired now, Lou. Used to work for the city, drove a bus." The cap was slowly loosening.

"I never should have hooked up with Gigi, you know. Worst mistake I ever made. I'll get back to finish her one of these days."

Hacker made a sound deep in his throat, a sick gargling sound, and his head raised as Beloit's attention swung towards him. "I'm not seeing so well, Hank," Hacker said weakly. "Everything kind of blurs."

The cap was almost free. Beloit watched Hacker, the nose of the Beretta sliding.

"Hold on, Terry," Skovich answered. "Don't go out on me."

"I'll . . . try."

Beloit's face was greasy with sweat. The Beretta continued to sag. Tension was telling on him. He was tiring.

"What're you going to do with the money, Lou?" Skovich asked. "Go somewhere and start over?"

"Just out of this town. Nothing good ever happened to me here."

Hacker made the sound again, louder, more prolonged, and as Beloit's head swung towards him Skovich provided his own croupy coughing, hunched low over his knees, giving the cap a final vicious twist. It came free. Carefully, he laid it aside, capping the open top with his fingers so the odor would not escape to draw Beloit's suspicion. Beloit was looking back and forth between the two detectives, his smile forced.

"You're a pretty pathetic pair, you know that?"

Skovich nodded sadly, testing the muscles in his legs. They felt

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weak and rubbery but they had to get him there. Beloit stood about eight feet away and he had to get in close. "Not much good for anything," he agreed wearily.

The Beretta was still drooping towards the floor. Skovich wouldn't let himself think about the risks. Concentrate on the moves, he told himself. This is the only chance we have.

"You think Hannon's gonna come through?" Beloit asked. "He gonna try to pull something on me?"

The man was an idiot. Didn't he remember anything from his years on the force? Skovich glanced across at Hacker. His partner's eyes were open; he was listening. "He said he'd do it, Lou. Hannon doesn't want anyone to die." He edged the open bottle close against his side.

"Well, somebody will," Beloit said. "If he tries anything."

As Beloit raised his free arm to wipe sweat from his face, Hacker's bound legs suddenly convulsed, jerking up towards his chest. Skovich got a firm grip on the bottle. The terrible strangling sound issuing from Hacker widened Beloit's eyes; he took an involuntary step towards him. Mustering every ounce of flabby strength he had in him, Skovich made his move, blasting up off the floor and driving himself at the older man.

Beloit saw the movement and started to swing back, the Beretta jerking upward, but Skovich was on him, flinging a wash of bleach into his face. Beloit bawled out, his hand rising instinctively to protect his eyes, the Beretta slipping in his grasp. Skovich shot a second faceful of bleach, then another. Beloit staggered back, clawing at his eyes, and Skovich jerked the gun from his hand and skated it across the floor. Beloit was reeling, bellowing. Skovich got him from behind in a chokehold and rammed the side of his head against the cement post. The older man's legs buckled, he started to fall, but Skovich smashed him into the post again for good measure. Beloit went down, slamming heavily into the floor.

Skovich crouched over him, struggling for breath. Proverbial stars waltzed before his eyes. Then he rolled the inert form over and scrabbled through his pockets until he found the handcuffs key. Staggering to Hacker, he freed his hands and cuffed Beloit's. It was over in seconds. The prisoner was sleeping and contained.

When the ropes were off Hacker's ankles, he looked up to see his partner grinning through the blood.

"What a team! Partners, right?"

"Do or die," Skovich said. "That's how it is."

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"What about that performance of mine? I could've been an actor. I was in a play once, in high school."

"You were brilliant," Skovich assured him.

"I could tell you had something going with that plastic bag. I know that look you get. So I figured I'd keep distracting him until you made your move." He was reaching, trying to stand. His face looked white and clammy.

"Stay down," Skovich said. "Stay here until I get some help."

Hacker shrugged him off. "I owe you big, Hank. You saved my skin. Don't think I'll forget it."

"You'd have done the same for me."

"Yeah, I would."

"Of course I won't mention that none of this would've happened if it hadn't been for you." Skovich was wheezing, still fighting for breath. "Didn't I tell you never to get into cars with strangers?"

Back to Beloit, where he removed the cellular phone from the unconscious man's belt. Hacker had his legs under him, holding the side of the tub, struggling to pull himself erect. "Damn it, Terry, stay down!" Skovich punched in Hannon's number. "We got him. Come on in. Paramedics. I've got two men down."

But Hacker was up, supporting himself against the tub. "It never should have worked, you know. If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it. You coming at him swinging a bottle of bleach." He began to snicker.

"Well, you weren't any help. Just sitting there bleeding all over yourself."

Hacker gave him a woozy grin. "Hey, how do you rehabilitate a dirty cop?"

"Huh?"

"You bleach him."

Footsteps pounded overhead. Skovich started to laugh, then cough. They were leaning together on the laundry tub, weak and wobbly with helpless laughter, when the first officers burst into the room.

The small room suddenly filled with busy people. Paramedics rolled Beloit onto one stretcher and forced the still-protesting Hacker onto another. Hopefully, Skovich eyed the door.

"Where's my stretcher?" he inquired. "My nice warm blankets?"

A sturdy female paramedic paused long enough to give him a practiced once-over. "Are you hurt, Detective?"

"Only dying of pneumonia right before your eyes."

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"I'm sorry. We can only handle two and the guard that goes with the prisoner."

"But I want to go with my partner. I want lights and sirens and all the good stuff. I'm a damned hero!"

"Don't let him ride with me," Hacker said from his stretcher. "He's got hearts on his shorts."

"Look, will somebody please bring me my clothes?"

Captain Hannon appeared at his side. "You all right, Skovich? Where are your clothes?" Through clenched teeth Skovich told him, and a natty young cop named Aronsen was dispatched to fetch them.

"A fine job, Hank," Hannon said with a firm clasp to the shoulder. He eyed the bleach bottle lying on the floor and his lips twitched. "Somewhat unorthodox but an outstanding job."

The paramedics were hoisting Beloit's stretcher, preparing to take him outside.

"Oh yeah," Skovich told them. "Better clean his face and eyes good. Full of bleach."

Young Aronsen reappeared. "I don't see any clothes."

"But they were there," Skovich protested. "Beloit made me strip and leave them on the bottom step."

"Sorry. They're not there."

One of the paramedics said, "I saw a pile of something on the step when we came in. I kicked it out of the way."

Skovich's teeth began to chatter. "But those were my clothes!"

"Never mind," Hannon said. "Somebody's got them. Aronsen, get this man a slicker and some boots. Put him in a squad car and take him to the hospital immediately. Don't wait for another ambulance." Another clasp to Skovich's shoulder. "I'll find your clothes, Hank. Let me get things squared away here and I'll bring them to you. Go on now, you don't look good at all."

The paramedics were hurrying Hacker's stretcher toward the basement steps, the sturdy female in command. Wearing his borrowed slicker and floppy boots, Skovich shuffled after.

"Hey, lady," he called to the woman as the stretcher disappeared into the upper reaches, "if I die before I get to the hospital, it's on your head."

His partner's cheerful voice floated back to him. "Try her again, Hank. Maybe you forgot to say 'aw shucks.'"

Skovich's fervent response came close, but it wasn't quite aw shucks. ●

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A CHRISTMAS CAROL
(Sort Of)
by D. L. Mullen

'Twas a month since last Christmas, and throughout the plant
Cabin fever was making us all rave and rant;
The foreman was swinging from rafter to rafter,
Frightening us all with maniacal laughter;
The lead person was growling at her computer
—She'd like to re-program it, with a six-shooter—
While I had just dropped off in front of my welder
(Dreaming of neighbors who chant, "Helter Skelter!")
When out in the warehouse there arose such a clatter
I woke with relief, wondering what was the matter.
The noise was increasing; as I moved to the door
I heard someone shout, "I can't take anymore!"
I looked out and spied kindly old John Fairfax
Yelling and waving a very large axe.
His eyes were so bloodshot, his screaming so frantic,
I knew right away this was no prank or antic.
"Work faster!" he shrieked, "but make sure what you do
Is Quality One!" —and he started to drool.
He noticed me then, and called me some names—
I knew poor old Fairfax had gone quite insane.
I guess he decided that I couldn't hear,
'Cos he got real close then, and screamed in my ear:
"On Dasher! On Dancer! On Sneezy and Doc!
It's fourteen below out! LET'S GO FOR A WALK!"
He got a choke-hold; my face started to bloat—
It was then I was saved by two men in white coats.
They grabbed him and wrestled, first taking his axe;
They put a straightjacket on poor John Fairfax.
He fought and he screamed, he cursed and he cried,
But all the men in white coats said was, "Let's go for a ride."
I heard him exclaim, as they dragged him from view:
"I'm totally bonkers—*but I'm saner than you!*"

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Art by Shirley Chan

LOOKING FOR DAVID

by Lawrence Block

Elaine said, "You never stop working, do you?"

I looked at her. We were in Florence, sitting at a little tile-topped table in the Piazza di San Marco, sipping cappuccino every bit as good as the stuff they served at the Peacock on Greenwich Avenue. It was a bright day but the air was cool and crisp, the city bathed in October light. Elaine was wearing khakis and a tailored safari jacket, and looked like a glamorous foreign correspondent, or perhaps a spy. I was wearing khakis, too, and a polo shirt, and the blue blazer she called my Old Reliable.

We'd had five days in Venice. This was the second of five days in Florence, and then we'd have six days in Rome before Alitalia took us back home again.

I said, "Nice work if you can get it."

"Uh-uh," she said. "I caught you. You were scanning the area the way you always do."

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"I was a cop for a lot of years."

"I know, and I guess it's a habit a person doesn't outgrow. And not a bad one, either. I have some New York street smarts myself, but I can't send my eyes around a room and pick up what you can. And you don't even think about it. You do it automatically."

"I guess. But I wouldn't call it working."

"When we're supposed to be basking in the beauties of Florence," she said, "and exclaiming over the classic beauty of the sculpture in the piazza, and instead you're staring at an old queen in a white linen jacket five tables over, trying to guess if he's got a yellow sheet and just what's written on it—wouldn't you call that working?"

"There's no guesswork required," I said. "I know what it says on his yellow sheet."

"You do?"

"His name is Horton Pollard," I said. "If it's the same man, and if I've been sending a lot of looks his way it's to make sure he's the man I think he is. It's well over twenty years since I've seen him. Probably more like twenty-five." I glanced over and watched the white-haired gentleman saying something to the waiter. He raised an eyebrow in a manner that was at once arrogant and apologetic. It was as good as a fingerprint. "It's him," I said. "Horton Pollard. I'm positive."

"Why don't you go over and say hello?"

"He might not want that."

"Twenty-five years ago you were still on the job. What did you do, arrest him?"

"Uh-huh."

"Honestly? What did he do? Art fraud? That's what comes to mind, sitting at an outdoor table in Florence, but he was probably just a stock swindler."

"Something white-collar, in other words."

"Looking for David" features one of Lawrence Block's most popular series characters, ex-cop Matt Scudder. British readers can also find the story in an anthology entitled *Whydunit,* edited by Martin Edwards, a book of mysteries involving curious motives for murder. Mr. Block has devised a curious motive indeed, but he manages to make it entirely believable. ¶

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"Something flowing-collar, from the looks of him. I give up. What did he do?"

I'd been looking his way, and our glances caught. I saw recognition come into his eyes, and his eyebrows went up again in that manner that was unmistakably his. He pushed his chair back, got to his feet.

"Here he comes," I said. "You can ask him yourself."

"Mr. Scudder," he said. "I want to say Martin, but I know that's not right. Help me out."

"Matthew, Mr. Pollard. And this is my wife, Elaine."

"How fortunate for you," he told me, and took the hand she extended. "I looked over here and thought, What a beautiful woman! Then I looked again and thought, I know that fellow. But then it took me a minute to place you. The name came first, or the surname, at any rate. His name's Scudder, but how do I know him? And then, of course, the rest of it came to me, all but your first name. I knew it wasn't Martin, but I couldn't sweep that name out of my mind and let Matthew come in." He sighed. "It's a curious muscle, the memory. Or aren't you old enough yet to have found it so?"

"My memory's still pretty good."

"Oh, mine's *good,*" he said. "It's just capricious. Willful, I sometimes think."

At my invitation, he pulled up a chair from a nearby table and sat down. "But only for a moment," he said, and asked what brought us to Italy, and how long we'd be in Florence. He lived here, he told us. He'd lived here for quite a few years now. He knew our hotel, on the east bank of the Arno, and pronounced it charming and a good value. He mentioned a cafe just down the street from the hotel that we really ought to try.

"Although you certainly don't need to follow my recommendations," he said, "or Michelin's, either. You can't get a bad meal in Florence. Well, that's not *entirely* true. If you insist on going to high-priced restaurants, you'll encounter the occasional disappointment. But if you simply blunder into whatever humble trattoria is closest, you'll dine well every time."

"I think we've been dining a little too well," Elaine said.

"It's a danger," he acknowledged, "although the Florentines manage to stay quite slim themselves. I started to bulk up a bit when I first came here. How could one help it? Everything tasted so good. But I took off the pounds I gained and I've kept them off.

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Though I sometimes wonder why I bother. For God's sake, I'm seventy-six years old."

"You don't look it," she told him.

"I wouldn't care to look it. But why is that, do you suppose? No one else on God's earth gives a damn what I look like. Why should it matter to me?"

She said it was self-respect, and he mused on the difficulty of telling where self-respect left off and vanity began. Then he said he was staying too long at the fair, wasn't he, and got to his feet. "But you must visit me," he said. "My villa is not terribly grand, but it's quite nice and I'm proud enough of it to want to show it off. Please tell me you'll come for lunch tomorrow."

"Well . . ."

"It's settled, then," he said, and gave me his card. "Any cab driver will know how to find it. Set the price in advance, though. Some of them will cheat you, although most are surprisingly honest. Shall we say one o'clock?" He leaned forward, placed his palms on the table. "I've thought of you often over the years, Matthew. Especially here, sipping *caffé nero* a few yards from Michelangelo's David. It's not the original, you know. That's in a museum, though even the museums are less than safe these days. You know the Uffizzi was bombed a few years ago?"

"I read about that."

"The Mafia. Back home they just kill each other. Here they blow up masterpieces. Still, it's a wonderfully civilized country, by and large. And I suppose I had to wind up here, near the David." He'd lost me, and I guess he knew it, because he frowned, annoyed at himself. "I just ramble," he said. "I suppose the one thing I'm short of here is people to talk to. And I always thought I could talk to you, Matthew. Circumstances prevented my so doing, of course, but over the years I regretted the lost opportunity." He straightened up.

"Tomorrow, one o'clock. I look forward to it."

"Well, of course I'm dying to go," Elaine said. "I'd love to see what his place looks like. 'It's not terribly grand, but it's quite nice.' I'll bet it's nice. I'll bet it's gorgeous."

"You'll find out tomorrow."

"I don't know. He wants to talk to you, and three might be a crowd for the kind of conversation he wants to have. It wasn't art theft you arrested him for, was it?"

"No."

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"Did he kill someone?"

"His lover."

"Well, that's what each man does, isn't it? Kills the thing he loves, according to whatsisname."

"Oscar Wilde."

"Thanks, Mr. Memory. Actually, I knew that. Sometimes when a person says whatsisname or whatchamacallit it's not because she can't remember. It's just a conversational device."

"I see."

She gave me a searching look. "There was something about it," she said. "What?"

"It was brutal." My mind filled with a picture of the murder scene, and I blinked it away. "You see a lot on the job, and most of it's ugly, but this was pretty bad."

"He seems so gentle. I'd expect any murder he committed to be virtually nonviolent."

"There aren't many nonviolent murders."

"Well, bloodless, anyway."

"This was anything but."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. What did he do?"

"He used a knife," I said.

"And stabbed him?"

"Carved him," I said. "His lover was younger than Pollard, and I guess he was a good-looking man, but you couldn't prove it by me. What I saw looked like what's left of the turkey the day after Thanksgiving."

"Well, that's vivid enough," she said. "I have to say I get the picture."

"I was first on the scene except for the two uniforms who caught the squeal, and they were young enough to strike a cynical pose."

"While you were old enough not to. Did you throw up?"

"No, after a few years you just don't. But it was as bad as anything I'd ever seen."

Horton Pollard's villa was north of the city, and if it wasn't grand it was nevertheless beautiful, a white-stuccoed gem set on a hillside with a commanding view of the valley. He showed us through the rooms, answered Elaine's questions about the paintings and furnishings, and accepted her explanation of why she couldn't stay for lunch. Or appeared to—as she rode off in the taxi that had brought us, something in his expression suggested for an instant that he felt slighted by her departure.

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"We'll dine on the terrace," he said. "But what's the matter with me? I haven't offered you a drink. What will you have, Matthew? The bar's well stocked, although I don't know that Paolo has a very extensive repertoire of cocktails."

I said that any kind of sparkling water would be fine. He said something in Italian to his houseboy, then gave me an appraising glance and asked me if I would want wine with our lunch.

I said I wouldn't. "I'm glad I thought to ask," he said. "I was going to open a bottle and let it breathe, but now it can just go on holding its breath. You used to drink, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, I did."

"The night it all happened," he said. "It seems to me you told me I looked as though I needed a drink. And I got out a bottle, and you poured drinks for both of us. I remember being surprised you were allowed to drink on duty."

"I wasn't," I said, "but I didn't always let that stop me."

"And now you don't drink at all?"

"I don't, but that's no reason why you shouldn't have wine with lunch."

"But I never do," he said. "I couldn't while I was locked up, and when I was released I found I didn't care for it, the taste or the physical sensation. I drank the odd glass of wine anyway, for a while, because I thought one couldn't be entirely civilized without it. Then I realized I didn't care. That's quite the nicest thing about age, perhaps the only good thing to be said for it. Increasingly, one ceases to care about more and more things, particularly the opinions of others. Different for you, though, wasn't it? You stopped because you had to."

"Yes."

"Do you miss it?"

"Now and then."

"I don't, but then I was never that fond of it. There was a time when I could distinguish different châteaux in a blind tasting, but the truth of the matter was that I never cared for any of them all that much, and after-dinner cognac gave me heartburn. And now I drink mineral water with my meals, and coffee after them. *Aqua minerale.* There's a favorite trattoria of mine where the owner calls it *aqua miserabile.* But he'd as soon sell me it as anything else. He doesn't care, and I shouldn't care if he did."

Lunch was simple but elegant—green salad, ravioli with butter and sage, and a nice piece of fish. Our conversation was mostly

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about Italy, and I was sorry Elaine hadn't stayed to hear it. He had a lot to say—about the way art permeated everyday Florentine life, about the long-standing enthusiasm of the British upper classes for the city—and I found it absorbing enough, but it would have held more interest for her than for me.

Afterward Paolo cleared our dishes and served espresso. We fell silent, and I sipped my coffee and looked out at the view of the valley and wondered how long it would take for the eye to tire of it.

"I thought I would grow accustomed to it," he said, reading my mind. "But I haven't yet, and I don't think I ever will."

"How long have you been here?"

"Almost fifteen years. I came on a visit as soon as I could after my release."

"And you've never been back?"

He shook his head. "I came intending to stay, and once here I managed to arrange the necessary resident visa. It's not difficult if there's money, and I was fortunate. There's still plenty of money, and there always will be. I live well, but not terribly high. Even if I live longer than anyone should, there will be money sufficient to see me out."

"That makes it easier."

"It does," he agreed. "It didn't make the years inside any easier, I have to say that, but if I hadn't had money I might have spent them someplace even worse. Not that the place they put me was a pleasure dome."

"I suppose you were at a mental hospital."

"A facility for the criminally insane," he said, pronouncing the words precisely. "The phrase has a ring to it, doesn't it? And yet it was entirely appropriate. The act I performed was unquestionably criminal, and altogether insane."

He helped himself to more espresso. "I brought you here so that I could talk about it," he said. "Selfish of me, but that's part of being old. One becomes more selfish, or perhaps less concerned about concealing one's selfishness from oneself and others." He sighed. "One also becomes more direct, but in this instance it's hard to know where to start."

"Wherever you want," I suggested.

"With David, I suppose. Not the statue, though. The man."

"Maybe my memory's not all I like to think it is," I said. "Was your lover's name David? Because I could have sworn it was

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Robert. Robert Naismith, and there was a middle name, but that wasn't David, either."

"It was Paul," he said. "His name was Robert Paul Naismith. He wanted to be called Rob. I called him David sometimes, but he didn't care for that. In my mind, though, he would always be David."

I didn't say anything. A fly buzzed in a corner, then went still. The silence stretched.

Then he began to talk.

"I grew up in Buffalo," he said. "I don't know if you've ever been there. A very beautiful city, at least in its nicer sections. Wide streets lined with elms. Some fine public buildings, some notable private homes. Of course, the elms are all lost to Dutch Elm disease, and the mansions on Delaware Avenue now house law firms and dental clinics, but everything changes, doesn't it? I've come round to the belief that it's supposed to, but that doesn't mean one has to like it.

"Buffalo hosted the Pan-American Exposition, which was even before my time. It was held in 1901, if I remember correctly, and several of the buildings raised for the occasion remain to this day. One of the nicest, built alongside the city's principal park, has long been the home of the Buffalo Historical Society, and houses their museum collection.

"Are you wondering where this is leading? There was, and doubtless still is, a circular drive at the Historical Building's front, and in the midst of it stood a bronze copy of Michelangelo's David. It might conceivably be a casting, though I think we can safely assume it to be just a copy. It's life-size, at any rate—or I should say actual-size, as Michelangelo's statue is itself considerably larger than life, unless the young David was built more along the lines of his adversary Goliath.

"You saw the statue yesterday—although, as I said, that too was a copy. I don't know how much attention you paid to it, but I wonder if you know what the sculptor is supposed to have said when asked how he managed to create such a masterpiece. It's such a wonderful line it would almost have to be apocryphal.

" 'I looked at the marble,' Michelangelo is said to have said, 'and I cut away the part that wasn't David.' That's almost as delicious as the young Mozart explaining that musical composition is the easiest thing in the world, you have merely to write down the music you hear in your head. Who cares, really, if either of them

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ever said any such thing? If they didn't, well, they ought to have done, wouldn't you say?

"I've known that statue all my life. I can't recall when I first saw it, but it must have been on my first visit to the Historical Building, and that would have been at a very early age. Our house was on Nottingham Terrace, not a ten-minute walk from the Historical Building, and I went there innumerable times as a boy. And it seems to me I always responded to the David. The stance, the attitude, the uncanny combination of strength and vulnerability, of fragility and confidence. And, of course, the sheer physical beauty of the David, the sexuality—but it was a while before I was aware of that aspect of it, or before I let myself acknowledge my awareness.

"When we all turned sixteen and got driver's licenses, David took on new meaning in our lives. The circular drive, you see, was the lovers' lane of choice for young couples who needed privacy. It was a pleasant, park-like setting in a good part of town, unlike the few available alternatives in nasty neighborhoods down by the waterfront. Consequently, 'going to see David' became a euphemism for parking and making out—which, now that I think of it, are euphemisms themselves, aren't they?

"I saw a lot of David in my late teens. The irony, of course, is that I was far more drawn to his young masculine form than to the generous curves of the young women who were my companions on those visits. I was gay, it seems to me, from birth, but I didn't let myself know that. At first I denied the impulses. Later, when I learned to act on them—in Front Park, in the men's room at the Greyhound station—I denied that they meant anything. It was, I assured myself, a stage I was going through."

He pursed his lips, shook his head, sighed. "A lengthy stage," he said, "as I seem still to be going through it. I was aided in my denial by the fact that whatever I did with other young men was just an adjunct to my real life, which was manifestly normal. I went off to a good school, I came home at Christmas and during the summer, and wherever I was I enjoyed the company of women.

"Lovemaking in those years was usually a rather incomplete affair. Girls made a real effort to remain virginal, at least in a strictly technical sense, if not until marriage then until they were in what we nowadays call a committed relationship. I don't remember what we called it then, but I suspect it was a somewhat less cumbersome phrase.

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"Still, sometimes one went all the way, and on those occasions I acquitted myself well enough. None of my partners had cause to complain. I could do it, you see, and I enjoyed it, and if it was less thrilling than what I found with male partners, well, chalk it up to the lure of the forbidden. It didn't have to mean there was anything *wrong* with me. It didn't mean I was *different* in any fundamental way.

"I led a normal life, Matthew. I would say I was determined to lead a normal life, but it never seemed to require much in the way of determination. During my senior year at college I became engaged to a girl I'd known literally all my life. Our parents were friends and we'd grown up together. I graduated and we were married. I took an advanced degree. My field was art history, as you may remember, and I managed to get an appointment to the faculty of the University of Buffalo. SUNY Buffalo, they call it now, but that was years before it became a part of the state university. It was just plain UB, with most of its student body drawn from the city and environs.

"We lived at first in an apartment near the campus, but then both sets of parents ponied up and we moved to a small house on Hallam, just about equidistant between the houses each of us had grown up in.

"It wasn't far from the statue of David, either."

He led a normal life, he explained. Fathered two children. Took up golf and joined the country club. He came into some family money, and a textbook he authored brought in royalties that grew more substantial each year. As the years passed, it became increasingly easy to believe that his relations with other men had indeed been a stage, and one he had essentially outgrown.

"I still felt things," he said, "but the need to act on them seemed to have passed. I might be struck by the physical appearance of one of my students, say, but I'd never do anything about it, or even seriously consider doing anything about it. I told myself my admiration was aesthetic, a natural response to male beauty. In youth, hormone-driven as one is, I'd confused this with actual sexual desire. Now I could recognize it for the innocent and asexual phenomenon it was."

Which was not to say that he'd given up his little adventures entirely.

"I would be invited somewhere to attend a conference," he said, "or to give a guest lecture. I'd be in another city, where I didn't know anyone and nobody knew me. And I would have had a few

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drinks, and I'd feel the urge for some excitement. And I could tell myself that, while a liaison with another woman would be a betrayal of my wife and a violation of my marital vows, the same could hardly be said for some innocent sport with another man. So I'd go to the sort of bar one goes to—they were never hard to find, even in those closeted days, even in provincial cities and college towns. And, once there, it was never hard to find someone."

He was silent for a moment, gazing off toward the horizon.

"Then I walked into a bar in Madison, Wisconsin," he said, "and there he was."

"Robert Paul Naismith."

"David," he said. "That's who *I* saw, that's the youth on whom my eyes fastened the instant I cleared the threshold. I can remember the moment, you see. I can see him now exactly as I saw him then. He was wearing a dark silk shirt and tan trousers and loafers without socks, which no one wore in those days. He was standing at the bar with a drink in his hand, and his physique and the way he stood, the stance, the attitude—he was Michelangelo's David. More than that, he was *my* David. He was my ideal, he was the object of a lifelong quest I hadn't even known I was on, and I drank him in with my eyes and I was lost."

"Just like that," I said.

"Oh yes," he agreed. "Just like that."

He was silent, and I wondered if he was waiting for me to prompt him. I decided he was not. He seemed to be choosing to remain in the memory for a moment.

Then he said, "Quite simply, I had never been in love with anybody. I have come to believe that it is a form of insanity. Not to love, to care deeply for another. That seems to me to be quite sane, and even ennobling. I loved my parents, certainly, and in a somewhat different way I loved my wife.

"This was categorically different. This was obsessive. This was preoccupation. It was the collector's passion: I must have this painting, this statue, this postage stamp. I must embrace it, I must own it utterly. It and it alone will complete me. It will change my own nature. It will make me worthwhile.

"It wasn't sex, not really. I won't say sex had nothing to do with it. I was attracted to David as I'd never been attracted to anyone before. But at the same time I felt less driven sexually than I had on occasion in the past. I wanted to possess David. If I could do that, if I could make him entirely mine, it scarcely mattered if I had sex with him."

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He fell silent, and this time I decided he was waiting to be prompted. I said, "What happened?"

"I threw my life over," he said. "On some flimsy pretext or other I stayed on in Madison for a week after the conference ended. Then I flew with David to New York and bought an apartment, the top floor of a brownstone in Turtle Bay. And then I flew back to Buffalo, alone, and told my wife I was leaving her."

He lowered his eyes. "I didn't want to hurt her," he said, "but of course I hurt her badly and deeply. She was not completely surprised, I believe, to learn there was a man involved. She'd inferred that much about me over the years, and probably saw it as part of the package, the downside of having a husband with an aesthetic sensibility.

"But she thought I cared for her, and I made it very clear that I did not. She was a woman who had never hurt anyone, and I caused her a good deal of pain, and I regret that and always will. It seems to me a far blacker sin than the one I served time for.

"Enough. I left her and moved to New York. Of course I resigned my tenured professorship at UB. I had connections throughout the academic world, and a decent if not glorious reputation, so I might have found something at Columbia or NYU. But the scandal I'd created made that less likely, and anyway I no longer gave a damn for teaching. I just wanted to live and enjoy my life.

"There was money enough to make that possible. We lived well. Too well, really. Not wisely but too well. Good restaurants every night, fine wines with dinner. Season tickets to the opera and the ballet. Summers in the Pines. Winters in Barbados or Bali. Trips to London and Paris and Rome. And the company, in town or abroad, of other rich queens."

"And?"

"And it went on like that," he said. He folded his hands in his lap, and a little smile played on his lips. "It went on, and then one day I picked up a knife and killed him. You know that part, Matthew. It's where you came in."

"Yes."

"But you don't know why."

"No, that never came out. Or if it did I missed it."

He shook his head. "It never came out. I didn't offer a defense, and I certainly didn't provide an explanation. But can you guess?"

"Why you killed him? I have no idea."

"But you must have come to know some of the reasons people have for killing other people? Why don't you humor an old sinner

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and try to guess. Prove to me that my motive was not unique after all."

"The reasons that come to mind are the obvious ones," I said, "and that probably rules them out. Let me see. He was leaving you. He was unfaithful to you. He had fallen in love with someone else."

"He would never have left," he said. "He adored the life we led and knew he could never live half so well with someone else. He would never fall in love with anyone else any more than he could have fallen in love with me. David was in love with himself. And of course he was unfaithful, and had been from the beginning, but I had never expected him to be otherwise."

"You realized you'd thrown your life away on him," I said, "and hated him for it."

"I *had* thrown my life away, but I didn't regret it. I'd been living a lie, and what loss to toss it aside? While jetting off to Paris for a weekend, does one long for the gentle pleasures of a classroom in Buffalo? Some may, for all I know. I never did."

I was ready to quit, but he insisted I come up with a few more guesses. They were all off the mark.

He said, "Give up? All right, I'll tell you. He changed."

"He changed?"

"When I met him," he said, "my David was the most beautiful creature I had ever set eyes on, the absolute embodiment of my lifelong ideal. He was slender but muscular, vulnerable yet strong. He was—well, go back to the San Marco piazza and look at the statue. Michelangelo got it just right. That's what he looked like."

"And then what? He got older?"

He set his jaw. "Everyone gets older," he said, "except for the ones who die young. It's unfair, but there's nothing for it. David didn't merely age. He coarsened. He thickened. He ate too much and drank too much and stayed up too late and took too many drugs. He put on weight. He got bloated. He grew jowly, and got pouchy under his eyes. His muscles wasted beneath their coating of fat and his flesh sagged.

"It didn't happen overnight. But that's how I experienced it, because the process was well along before I let myself see it. Finally I couldn't help but see it.

"I couldn't bear to look at him. Before I had been unable to take my eyes off him, and now I found myself averting my eyes. I felt betrayed. I fell in love with a Greek god, and before my eyes he turned into a Roman emperor."

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"And you killed him for that?"

"I wasn't trying to kill him."

I looked at him.

"Oh, I suppose I was, really. I'd been drinking, we'd both been drinking, and we'd had an argument, and I was angry. I don't suppose I was too far gone to know that he'd be dead when I was done, and that I'd have killed him. But that wasn't the point."

"It wasn't?"

"He passed out," he said. "He was lying there, naked, reeking of the wine seeping out of his pores, this great expanse of bloated flesh as white as marble. I suppose I hated him for having thus transformed himself, and I know I hated myself for having been an agent of his transformation. And I decided to do something about it."

He shook his head, and sighed deeply. "I went into the kitchen," he said, "and I came back with a knife. And I thought of the boy I'd seen that first night in Madison, and I thought of Michelangelo. And I tried to *be* Michelangelo."

I must have looked puzzled. He said, "Don't you remember? I took the knife and cut away the part that wasn't David."

It was a few days later when I recounted all this to Elaine. We were at an outdoor cafe near the Spanish Steps. "All those years," I said, "I took it for granted he was trying to destroy his lover. That's what mutilation generally is, the expression of a desire to annihilate. But he wasn't trying to disfigure him, he was trying to refigure him."

"He was just a few years ahead of his time," she said. "Now they call it liposuction and charge the earth for it. I'll tell you one thing. As soon as we get back I'm going straight from the airport to the gym, before all this pasta becomes a permanent part of me. I'm not taking any chances."

"I don't think you've got anything to worry about."

"That's reassuring. How awful, though. How godawful for both of them."

"The things people do."

"You said it. Well, what do *you* want to do? We could sit around feeling sorry for two men and the mess they made of their lives, or we could go back to the hotel and do something life-affirming. You tell me."

"It's a tough one," I said. "How soon do you need my decision?" ●

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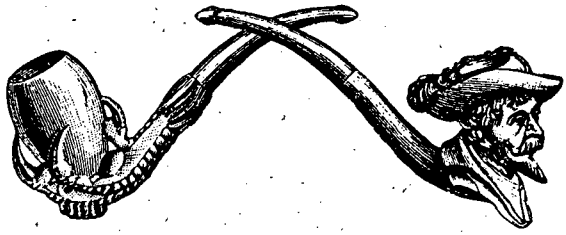

THE RAVING

A Poe-etic Version of the Baskerville Legend

by Len Moffatt

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many quaint and curious volumes that were leather bound—
While I nodded, squinting, scowling, suddenly I heard a growling,
And then an awful, hideous howling, as from some gigantic hound—
"'Tis some watchdog," I muttered, "howling just to guard the ground—
Only this or I'll be bound."

Heeding not Mortimer's warning, I vowed to sit until the morning
Perusing all the tomes and parchments in this chamber to be found
Lamplight pages was adorning, while I sat there sneering, scorning
All those tales of hellish warning of a supernatural hound—
"Just some watchdog," I repeated, "howling just to guard the ground—
Only this—Oh! What's *that* sound?"

I had heard an eerie scratching on the window's wooden thatching,
Followed by more ghastly growling just outside my chamber door—
Then there came a sorry whining, as from some puppy pleading, pining
To be let in for its dining as there was nothing on the moor—
"Poor old watchdog," I muttered, "looking for its *soup du jour*—
Only this and nothing more."

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Swiftly I the door unbolted, and was violently jolted
By a creature so gigantic I could barely see its shape—
As I fled through all the hallways, knowing it was with me always,
It would haunt me in the mall ways, it was Rue Morgue's killer ape!
"Holmes and Dupin," I shouted, "Come and help me to escape!"
They just stood with jaws agape.

Then a shot from nowhere rang out. "Good old Watson!!" Sherlock sang out,
As the ape sank to the floor, and Watson gave it even more—
Meanwhile I was really raving, glad I had a life worth saving,
As I knelt upon the paving, thanking Watson in the door—
"How came it here?" Holmes wondered, "Dupin, tell us of its lore."
Quoth the Frenchman, "Nevairmore!"

144 and Going Strong!

Sherlock Holmes must surely be the most parodied fictional character ever created. Imitation, whether humorous or serious, is the most natural of tributes to a literary creation that has truly engaged the imagination. We hope you have enjoyed Len Moffat's Poe-esque salute to Holmes and other illustrious characters from the mystery canon. We offer it in honor of Holmes's 144th birthday, an event whose date has been fixed by the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization. The Irregulars, who assert that Holmes is alive and well and living in retirement in Sussex, meet each year in New York City on Twelfth Night to celebrate the great sleuth's birth.

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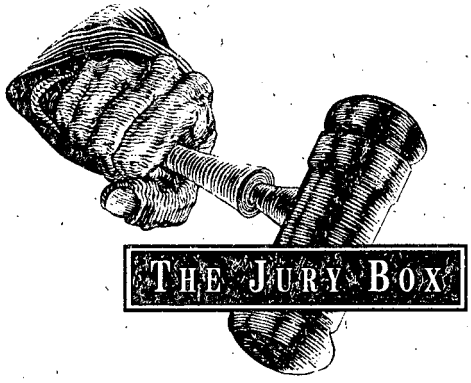

by Jon L. Breen

Most crime fiction reviewed in this space comes from a few (and with all the mergers and acquisitions, fewer all the time) major New York trade publishers. But in recent years, publishers outside the Manhattan mainstream have become an increasing presence in the field. Writers like Michael Nava, Katherine V. Forrest, and Gary Phillips were published by small regional or specialty publishers before moving to more widely known imprints.

The specialty publisher with the most star-studded list is Douglas G. Greene's Crippen & Landru (P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505), which has produced short story collections by some of the biggest names in contemporary crime fiction. The latest is Michael Gilbert's *The Man Who Hated Banks and Other Mysteries* ($16 trade paper; $40 hardcover signed limited), 18 previously uncollected tales by a longtime *EQMM* favorite and one of the genre's greatest writers at any length. The publisher advises that Gilbert considers the title story his very best short.

The British Do-Not Press's Bloodlines imprint, which specializes in fiction noir from both sides of the Atlantic, has picked up Gary Lovisi's *Hellbent on Homicide* (distributed by Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, PA; 19425-0007; $14.95), adding two new short stories about wildman Bay City cops Griff and Fats to the super-hardboiled short novel reviewed here in July 1996. While "Headhunters" seemed more like the first chapter of another novel, the over-the-top "Christmas Crazies" may be the best yet about the pair. Below are five more new books from outside the usual channels, starting with another U.S.-

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distributed item from a British tough crime imprint.

*** Charlotte Carter: *Rhode Island Red,* Serpent's Tail, 180 Varick St., 10th Floor, New York, NY 10014; $15.99. The first novel about New York street saxophonist, certified genius, and Grace Jones look-alike Nanette is a dazzler. Carter spins an intriguing plot in the familiar Maltese Falcon vein, but style and atmosphere are the keys to this jazz-drenched story. I don't review enough first novels to make pronouncements, but it's hard to imagine this one won't be in Edgar contention for best debut.

*** K.j.a. Wishnia: *Flat Rate and Other Tales,* The Imaginary Press, P.O. Box 509, East Setauket, NY 11733-0509; $4.95. A small book of under 100 pages offers a novella and a short story about Ecuador-born Filomena Buscarela, New York cop turned cab driver. Sharp first-person narration enlivens both, and the cleverly plotted short includes a statement many contemporary mystery readers will agree with: "Lately, it seems that every damn crime isn't a crime unless there's a few thousand dollars' worth of cocaine attached to it. Frankly it's starting to annoy me." There are also two slight but interesting science fiction tales from the cyberpunk school.

*** Elizabeth Wetzel, *Deadly Arts,* Avalon, 401 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10003; $17.95. Long established as a supplier of wholesome popular fiction for a conservative public library market, Avalon has had a low profile when it comes to seeking review attention. The first novel about Genevieve Galway, a middle-aged Catholic high school English teacher who turns detective when a poisonous small-town art critic is murdered, is a traditional whodunit written in an unpretentious style. The humor and narrative touches are less forced, and the puzzle plot fairer and fuller, than in many novels from the majors.

** L.C. Hayden: *Who's Susan,* Commonwealth Publications, 9764 45th Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T6E 5C5; $4.99 U.S., $6.99 Canadian. This first novel by a Texas author combines the child-in-jeopardy and amnesia thriller in the Mary Higgins Clark vein. However clichéd the dialogue and lead-footed the prose, there's real narrative impetus here. Undistinguished as the writing is, I had to know what happened.

** David Champion: *Celebrity Trouble,* Allen A. Knoll, 200 West Victoria Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101; $20. In his third appearance, great defender Bomber Hanson represents a

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Michael Jackson-like entertainer on a child molestation charge. Some of the trial action is enjoyable, but the plot is mighty thin for a novel-length work.

**** P.C. Doherty: *A Tournament of Murders,* St. Martin's, $21.95. In the third (and best yet) of the author's series about Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims, the Franklin tells his tale, a closed-circle whodunit of knights reunited in a seemingly haunted castle to re-examine a double murder of years before. Including both a dying message and a locked room, this novel shows Doherty at his very best. His swashbuckling approach to the historical mystery and his devotion to impossible crime again mark him the closest we have to a contemporary John Dickson Carr.

*** Parnell Hall: *Suspense,* Mysterious, $23. New York private eye Stanley Hastings investigates some threats against a bestselling author's wife in a sly satire on publishing in general and the mystery/suspense fiction field in particular. Some may resent how Hall toys with the reader's expectations, but most will be delighted. A bonus is the account of what one must go through to operate a private car in Manhattan.

*** Anne Perry: *The Silent Cry,* Fawcett/Columbine, $24.95. The novels about William Monk (amnesiac private eye), Hester Latterly (ex-Crimea nurse), and Oliver Rathbone (ace barrister) are always enthralling. This one is below the usual standard, though, mainly because of the most painfully obvious least-suspected-person criminal since Charley Goodfellow in Poe's "Thou Art the Man."

** Amanda Cross: *The Puzzled Heart,* Ballantine, $21. Though beginning with a dramatic kidnapping and including the usual intelligent talk, this is a weak entry in the Kate Fansler series. The lack of Cross's trademark great-author theme may disappoint some fans, and the whole enterprise lacks credibility. (Even liberals like your reviewer may be bothered by the author's facile assumptions about the right wing.)

Deadly Women: The Woman Mystery Reader's Indispensable Companion. (Carroll & Graf, $19.95), edited by Jan Grape, Dean James, and the late (and much missed) Ellen Nehr, is full of entertaining and informative interviews and articles by and about female mystery writers. Those who know the genre's past may question some articles' revisionist history of American women crime writers, who have always been prominent and didn't emerge from bondage in the 1980s.

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NEXT ISSUE...

Cedar Savage
BY DOUG ALLYN

Dark Lady Down
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

Murder at the Jubilee
BY AMY MYERS

The Tosca Dagger
BY ROBERT BARNARD

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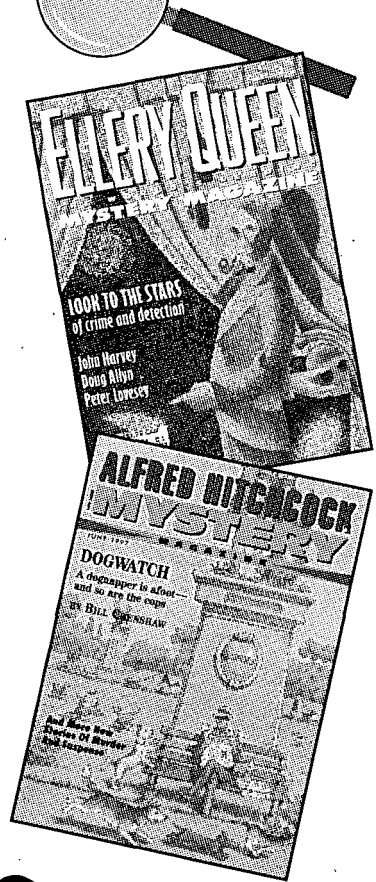

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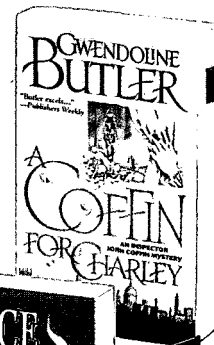

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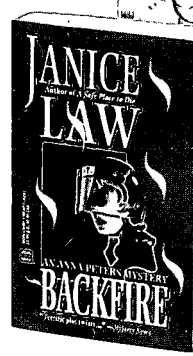

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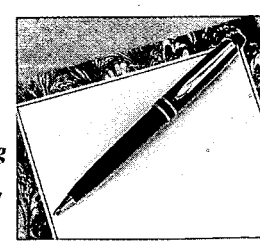

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